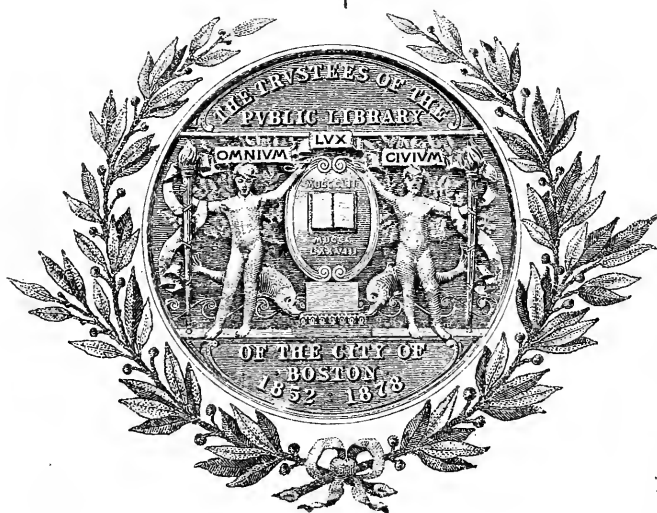


The
QUEEN'S MAN



ELEANOR C. PRICE

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THE QUEEN'S MAN



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A ROMANCE OF THE WARS
OF THE ROSES

By

ELEANOR C. PRICE

Author of "Off the High Road" "Angelot" etc

"Dance you, reds and whites and yellows"



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Chapter I

THE MAKING OF THE WILL

SIR WILLIAM RODEN, Knight, had made his will, and the long parchment lay upon the table. He had left large benefactions to the poor, and to the parish church ; he had given exact directions as to his burial in the chapel north of the choir, where his wife and his two sons already lay, as to the torches that were to be carried in his funeral procession, and the tapers to be burnt upon his grave for seven years after and on every anniversary following, as to the prayers for his soul to be said in that same chapel (which indeed he had built) by an honest priest of good conversation, for a period of time that he did not think it necessary to limit. The dim future might be safely left in the care of God, and to the piety of his one dear grandchild and her descendants. To her, Margaret Roden, he left everything ; the castle and manor of Ruddiford, with all its estates and tenements, farms, mills, pastures, market dues, and advantages of every kind, and the household goods of which he added a long inventory. And, in case the rheumatism which racked his limbs should kill him while she was still young and unmarried, he committed her to the care and guardianship of the Lady Isabel, Baroness Marlowe, the widow of his oldest friend, praying her to take Margaret into her own house, and to provide for the trusty management of her property till she should be married or of age. And in all these matters he prayed her ladyship to take counsel with the exe-

cutors of this last will of his, namely, her step-son the Lord Marlowe, Sir Thomas Pye the Vicar of Ruddiford, and the Masters Simon and Timothy Toste, brothers, the doctor and the lawyer in whom he placed confidence. And so, with many pious words, he ended his testament.

"Now read it in our ears, my good Timothy," he said.

The attorney obeyed him, his thin voice ringing through such silence as could be had on that November afternoon, with the great west wind making an organ accompaniment, rattling the lattices and roaring in the wide chimney. There was an unearthly pause, the stillness of death for a minute or two, through which the voice piped clearly; then the thundering waves came rolling up once more over moor and meadow and forest, and the wind yelled and screeched with more fury for the long breath it had taken.

Logs were burning on the hearth, and Sir William, a noble-looking old man with a white beard, was sitting in his high carved chair close to the chimney-corner, his velvet gown folded round his knees. In the middle of the vaulted room, his own room, reached by a short flight of steps from the castle hall, four persons sat opposite to him at a table, one of them reading, the other three listening to the will, the contents of which they all knew already; for three of them were executors, and the fourth, Sir William's secretary, had acted as clerk to Timothy Toste on the occasion.

The two listening old friends,—Sir Thomas the Vicar, thin and tall, with a face like a turnip-lanthorn, so did the spirit shine through the starved-looking flesh, and Simon Toste the apothecary, fat, short, with a beaming smile that almost undid the harm of his medicines—shook their heads simultaneously as they realised the unbounded confidence their patron was placing in the Lady Marlowe. The secretary smiled faintly as he watched them, seeming to read

their thought. He was a marvellously handsome young man, an Italian, brought to England when a boy by John Roden, Sir William's son, who had lived much abroad and had married a Venetian lady at the court of King René of Anjou. These two had followed the Princess Margaret when she came to England as the bride of Henry the Sixth, and both had died of the English fogs, leaving as a legacy to Sir William their small page Antonio, picked up as a beggar in the street, and their precious little daughter, the Queen's godchild, Margaret. Before this time, William Roden, the knight's elder son, had been killed in a brawl in London streets, dying unmarried, so that the baby child was the one hope of the house of Ruddiford.

Both children, Antonio being seven years older than Margaret, and her slave and play-fellow, throve wonderfully in the chilly northern air and hardy life of the castle. Sir William, the most simple-minded of men, had watched them growing up and developing side by side, stronger and more beautiful every day, and had given no thought to the probable end of this childish intimacy, or to the necessity of providing his grandchild with some other companion than the low-born, velvet-eyed foreign boy, till Master Simon Toste plucked up courage to speak to him on the subject. Then Sir William, unwillingly convinced, did the easiest thing that came to hand, sending to his neighbours the Tilneys at King's Hall, half a dozen miles away, and proposing that their daughter Alice, a couple of years older than Margaret, should come to Ruddiford and live with her for an indefinite time. This proposal being kindly received, he was satisfied, and would not listen for a moment to Simon Toste's further advice,—“Send the Italian fellow back to Italy.” Sir William was fond of Antonio, who knew how to make himself indispensable, and who now very easily, as it seemed, transferred his caressing ways from Mistress Margaret to her grandfather.

The old man was growing helpless. Antonio became his devoted personal attendant as well as his capable secretary. Though the steward, the bailiff, the town officials, the men-at-arms even (for Ruddiford had its little garrison) were disposed to sneer at receiving Sir William's orders frequently by the mouth of Antonio, they had no real fault to find. He did no harm to any one. If he had any evil passions or wild ambitions, they were kept well in check. He was a foreigner, with a clever head and a face of classical beauty. Perhaps this was enough to make the sturdy Midlanders hate him. With women, as a rule, he did as he pleased, though no scandal had yet touched him, and through his discretion no one knew that Mistress Alice Tilney had fallen desperately in love with him.

This young girl's parents had both died of the pestilence since she came to live at Ruddiford, and King's Hall had now fallen into the hands of her brother, Jasper Tilney, who kept house there with a set of wild and daring companions, and had lately given great offence to Sir William Roden by coming forward as a suitor for Margaret. The estates marched: this was his only excuse for such presumption; and Sir William refused his offer with a cold politeness very near contempt, thus turning his neighbour into a troublesome enemy.

Such was the state of affairs when Sir William Roden made his will; and beyond the boundaries of Ruddiford and King's Hall, the War of the Red and White Roses, in that year of our Lord 1460, was desolating the land in its wandering changing way. At this moment, the party of the White Rose had the best of it, and King Henry was a prisoner in their hands, while the Queen and the young Prince were fugitives in Scotland.

"That is my will," Sir William said loudly, when Timothy ceased to read. "Now to sign it. But we must have witnesses. Go, Tony, call a couple of fellows who can write; Nick Steward for one, the

parish clerk for t'other. You might have brought him with you, master Parson."

The secretary rose readily enough, but looked askance, as he did so, at the three old executors. They were putting their heads together, muttering doubtfully. Antonio's dark and brilliant eyes, glancing from them to his master, seemed to convey to him the consciousness of disapproval on their part.

"What's the matter?" the knight cried sharply, and his impatient temper surged up red into his pale cheeks. "What are you plotting, you three? Anything wrong with the will? Keep your fault-finding till I ask for it. Your business is not to carp, but to carry out faithfully. Fetch the witnesses, you rascal, Tony. Am I to be obeyed?—Well, Parson, say your say."

"It is about these Marlowes, Sir William," said the Vicar.

"Ay, Sir Thomas, and what about them? My oldest friends, remember."

"A friendship of a long while back, if I am not mistaken."

"And pray, Sir, is it the worse for that? A long while back? Yes, from the field of Agincourt,—not that it began then. We were brothers in arms, Marlowe and I. King Harry knighted us both with his own hand, after the battle. He bound us for ever to his service, and that of his son. Ah, in those days, England wanted no one but Harry. He was our man, a man indeed! All these Yorks, with their false pretty faces and curly pates,—away with 'em! I'll leave Meg in the charge of a good Lancastrian, and though I have not seen Harry Marlowe for years, I know he is as true a man as his father, God rest him. Well, Parson, what maggot have you got in that wise head of yours?"

Thomas Pye listened patiently. He knew very well that his patron, once fairly off on the legend of Agincourt and the friends of his youth, would not be checked

by reason. Indeed, Sir William was at no time very reasonable. With charming qualities, he was a wilful man, and it was sometimes easier to lead him in small matters than in great. If once convinced in his own mind, opposition was apt to be useless. The good men of Ruddiford took him as he was and followed him meekly, except where Mistress Margaret was concerned. There, love and duty gave them courage, and they spoke their minds, as little Simon had done in the case of Antonio.

"We are all mortal, Sir William," said the Vicar. "I hope from my heart that you may live twenty years longer, by which time this will of yours will signify nothing, so far as it affects your grand-daughter. But you may die next week, Sir."

"Without doubt, Thomas," said Sir William, smiling and stroked his beard. "I have provided for that, as you hear."

"Ah! You have left Margaret's entire future in the hands of this Lady Marlowe, the second wife of your old friend."

"A most religious lady of high birth and great position."

"Ah! My brother, who lives at Coventry, and who had some work as a lawyer with the Parliament, was in London a month ago. He heard that the Earl of March had,—slanderous tongues will talk—had visited the Lady Marlowe at her house in Buckinghamshire."

Sir William laughed aloud.

"She is a woman of fifty, at least," he said. "Your brother might have been better employed than in listening to such tales, my good Thomas."

The Vicar blushed.

"You misinterpret me," he said. "I was thinking of politics. They say, plainly speaking, that a Yorkist success would bring over the Lady Marlowe and her large influence to that side. There is some enmity between her and the Queen,——"

"I do not believe it," said Sir William. "The Lady Isabel would never be so disloyal to her husband's memory. Besides, her son would see to that. You will tell me next that Harry Marlowe is a follower of York!"

"Harry Marlowe,—do you know what they call that unfortunate man, Sir William."

The old knight stared at him with wide blue eyes. "On my faith," he said, "you talk like a crazy fellow, Thomas Pye."

"They call him Mad Marlowe. They say that a few years ago, when he disappeared for a time and was said to be abroad, his step-mother was compelled to put him in chains for his violence. He recovered, mercifully. He is a good Lancastrian, yes, for what he is worth. He follows the Queen everywhere, or journeys on her business. A true man, I believe, but——" the Vicar touched his forehead significantly.

"Why did I not hear all these tales before I made my will?" growled Sir William.

"I heard them from my brother but yesterday. Master Timothy had already drawn out your will, but I knew little of its particulars. You will not sign it, I hope, in its present form. You will not leave your grandchild in the hands of these persons."

"Is your brother here?"

"No, Sir William. He has gone back to Coventry."

Then followed a short and sharp argument, at the end of which Sir William Roden flew into one of those rages which had often harmed himself and those dear to him. He spoke words of such violence to the Vicar, that this excellent man strode erect out of the castle, back to his house beside the church, shaking the dust off his feet and leaving the foolish old knight to do as he pleased with his own. Timothy and Simon quailed beneath the old man's furious anger and soon fled also in a less dignified fashion. Antonio hastily fetched two witnesses; the will was signed as it stood,

and locked away in Sir William's great chest, with the other deeds of the estate.

When all this was done, Sir William became calm, and sat for a long time silent by the fire. The raging wind had fallen ; there was no sound in the room but the cracking of the logs, and now and then the pushing of benches, the clatter of steel, and the hum of voices in the hall below. Antonio sat at the table, his face in his hands, and watched the old man between his fingers. He loved him in his cat-like way, and admired his high spirit and suddenly flaming temper. It gave him a thrill of physical pleasure to see those three wise worthies discredited and driven out like a set of fools by Sir William's proud loyalty to his old traditions and the name of his earliest friend. What did it matter if the Vicar was right, if these Marlowes were unworthy of the trust to be placed in them ? It might not be any the worse, in the end, for Antonio.

A low whistle from the old master fetched him to his feet. It was the call of his childhood, to which he had answered always like a dog, fearless of the fiery temper that kept most people on their guard. Next probably to his grandchild, though with a long interval and on a different plane altogether, Sir William loved this other legacy from the handsome, luxurious, wandering younger son who had come home to Ruddiford only to die.

Antonio made two steps across the floor and crouched before Sir William, whose thin hand fumbled with his black mop of hair.

"Tony, I hate to be thwarted," he said.

"And it is the worse for those who thwart you," murmured the Italian. "You send them skipping, dear Sir," and he showed his white teeth, laughing silently.

"Peace, rascal, no irreverence," said the old man. "Sir Thomas is a saint ; but what should move him to listen to that peddling brother of his against my noble friends, and to expect me—me !—to change my

plan for his scandalous gossiping? He might have considered,—here is Meg sixteen years old and more—I may die next week,—to-night, for that matter,—Tony, I may die to-night.”

“No, no,” the young man murmured soothingly; “but if you did, there is the will safely made.”

“No thanks to those three fools,” said Sir William. “Yes, ’tis safely made; but if I had listened to them, and died,—or even did I live to make another, in these frightful times, how could I devise to protect Margaret? Her old nurse and Alice Tilney against the world! No marriage arranged for,—Jasper Tilney bold as the very devil,—he and his Fellowship might step in and carry her off before she could reach safety with the Abbess of Coleford! There, to the Abbey, she would have to go, and Alice with her, for in her own castle she would not be safe. Yes, by Our Lady, and as I hope to be saved, the will is not enough, Tony. Fetch your ink and pens. You will write a letter to my Lady Marlowe; you will tell her of the trust I have placed in her and Harry, and of the whole state of things here; you will bid her send a person, with authority from herself, to take charge of my grandchild if need arises, and in case of my death or any other accident to fetch her away to Swanlea or elsewhere, if it be her will. We shall have men enough for an escort,—unless indeed my Lady finds Meg a husband in the meanwhile, who can enter into possession here and guard his wife and her estates. Well, well, all this in good time. Light up your candles, throw on another log, and sit down and write as I bid you. My Lady go over to York, because of the issue of one battle! I would as soon believe it of my old friend Marlowe himself. She is a woman of spirit, and if it be true that Edward of March visited her, I warrant you she received him so that he will scarce do it again. Farrago of tales! Haste, Tony! Black Andrew shall ride south this very night with the letter.”

It was a difficult letter to write, for the knight's directions were long and wandering, like his talk; but Antonio was a fine scribe, with a clever way of putting things, and also spelt English better than many an Englishman. There was something to touch the most worldly heart in the frank and simple confidence, the perfect trust in her loyalty, with which Sir William Roden committed his young grandchild's future into Lady Marlowe's friendly keeping. And this letter, which was the direct consequence of the Vicar's warning intervention, and which, far more effectually than the locked-up will, decided the future of Margaret Roden and of Ruddiford, was carried south in the small hours of the next morning by an armed messenger in Sir William's livery of yellow laced with gold.

Chapter II

“YOURSELF, MY LORD !”

“**S**IT you down and sing to me, my sweetheart, my golden Meg. Why do you stand there, staring at the snow ?”

The old man's voice, impatient but soft, as it always became when he spoke to his grandchild, broke suddenly on the silence of the room.

It was Christmas Eve, and the afternoon was closing in ; there was a clamour of church bells from the town, a distant noise of shouting and trumpeting in the streets, where mummers and morris-dancers were pacing forth on their way up to the castle. The still air was laden with snow ; wild November had given way to the hard grip of a most wintry December, and all that northern midland country was snowed up and frozen. The deep clay-stained stream of the Ruddy, winding between willow copses through the flat meadows on which Ruddiford Castle looked down, was covered with ice, though not yet hard enough to bear man and horse, so that the usual ford some way below the bridge was a difficulty, and all the country traffic had to pass over Sir William's bridge under the castle wall. The road that led to the ford was deep in snow ; that which ended at the bridge was already well furrowed and trampled. The guard at the bridge tower, which defended its further entrance, while the castle gates commanded its narrow twisting length, its projecting piers and niches for foot passengers, had enough to do

in receiving Sir William's tolls from horse and cart and waggon, as the country people pressed in to the Christmas market.

It was not only the white and grey wilderness, the heavy shadow of the woods that swept away beyond the meadows, the frozen river and moving peasant figures on the bridge, that kept Margaret Roden's eyes employed as she stood in her grandfather's window. At this moment under the heavy snow-clouds, a flood of glowing yellow light poured out and glorified all that desolate world. The bridge, the tower, the polished, shining river, a band of horsemen with flashing lances and fluttering pennons who rode up from the south,—all this became suddenly like a hard, brilliant illumination in some choice book of prayers. Margaret forgot to answer her grandfather, so busy was she in gazing down at the bridge, and Sir William's own thoughts were distracted by something which told him,—the knowledge coming rather as a shock—that in the last few months his pet child had grown into a woman, and a beautiful one too. It was a most lovely picture, of which he had only a side view from within; the exquisite lines of Margaret's figure, the perfect shape of her head and neck, the warm colouring of the cheek, the masses of soft red-brown hair, which, far away from courts and fashions, she wore unconventionally as she and her old nurse pleased. The setting sun in its glory bathed this young figure, standing in the broad new window of Sir William's room, the window which he had made for his son John's sake, to let in the south and the sun.

"My golden Meg," he repeated, half to himself, as his eyes followed the broad track of sunshine on the rush-strewn floor. Then he went on muttering: "Christmas here, and no answer from my Lady! If she could see the girl now, she would not fear the charge of her."

A trumpet-call rang through the air. Meg stepped closer to the window, threw back the lattice suddenly

and leaned out, so that she might see the whole length of the bridge.

Sir William's guard at the tower had not delayed that troop of riders long, and they were now crossing the bridge at a foot's pace. Their leader, a tall man almost unarmed, riding a richly trapped horse and wearing a velvet cap with young Prince Edward's badge of a silver swan, was stooping wearily on his saddle when he rode in from the heavy country ways. But from the middle of the bridge he looked up at the castle; and there he saw the great window set suddenly open, and the vision of a girl looking down upon him,—"like a saint from the windows of heaven," as he said afterwards. For the full golden glory of the light rested upon her, and all the rugged old keep shone like the ramparts of the clouds, and Sir William Roden's yellow banner, heavy with the embroidery of her hands, rose slowly from the flag-staff on the leads and flapped high above her head in the breath of the evening.

The stranger looked for a moment or two, his face, thin and dark with heavy eyes weary of the way, lifted towards Margaret, who in all her young womanly beauty bent upon him the intent, wondering gaze of a child. Then he bared his brown head and bowed down to his horse's neck; then he looked up again, riding very slowly, and so, still with eyes aloft and a new flame of life in them, passed out of Margaret's sight into the shadow of the walls.

"Meg! What do you see down there, child?"

The question was quick and imperious. It startled Mistress Meg, who for the last few minutes had quite forgotten her grandfather's presence. She turned, and clanged the lattice to. At the same moment the snow-cloud came down and smothered the struggling sun in his five minutes' victory. The room became dark, except for the flickering flames under the chimney.

Meg could not answer her grandfather, for in good

faith she did not know who or what she had seen. Some one she had never seen before, and must see again,—yes, if all the armies of York and Lancaster were between! which they were not, for her keen senses were very conscious of sounds below, of an honoured guest arriving. He,—he, whose look and bearing, even at that distance, had taught her something she had never known—a few minutes, and he would be standing in the room, talking with her grandfather, looking at her once more. Was he old? Was he young? Was he the king himself, Henry of Lancaster, into whose dark and gentle eyes she had looked up once as a child? Was he one of King Arthur's knights come back from fairyland,—Sir Launcelot, perhaps, of whom her nurse had told her the story?

She came silently forward, took her lute and touched its strings; but she could not sing, for her heart was beating so that it choked her. "It was, grandfather," she said, coming nearer to him, "it was a troop of horse that crossed the bridge."

"Whose men? Not Jasper Tilney's? Was he there himself?"

"He? yes,—oh no, no, not Jasper Tilney—a knight, a prince, a noble lord—how should I know?" the girl said, then laughed and broke off suddenly.

The door of the room was opened, and two servants carried in tall copper candlesticks, with wax candles lighted, which they set down upon the table. Then Antonio came swiftly in, with a side-glance at Margaret, and stood before his master. "Sir, the Lord Marlowe asks to be received by your worship. He brings letters from my Lady his mother."

"Ha! His Lordship is very welcome."

With some difficulty Sir William lifted his stiffened limbs from his chair, and advanced a few steps towards the stairs, leaning heavily on his stick. It hardly seemed support enough for him. Margaret and Antonio moved forward at the same instant to help him. Their eyes met, and the Italian, as if commanded,

fell back suddenly and stood like a servant in the background. A pretty, fair girl slipped into the room and passed close to his shoulder, going round to wait upon Margaret. As she went, she lingered long enough to breathe in his ear, “Who is this?” and the young man answered in the same whisper, inaudible to the others, “Mad Marlowe.” He smiled as he spoke. “Oh, no danger then!” murmured Alice Tilney, her wild brother’s partisan in secret, though in Sir William’s presence she dared not name Jasper. Antonio only smiled again.

Way-worn, and wet with snow, Lord Marlowe was ushered into the room by the old steward and the other servants. He was a tall slender man of thirty-five or thereabouts, with a slight stoop of the shoulders; his face was long, brown and delicate, with dark hazel eyes that were strangely attractive and sweet, yet shining with a sort of wildness, or rather a wistful melancholy. His hair, ruffled into untidy curls by the wind, gave him a look more picturesque than courtly. His eyes passed quickly over Sir William Roden, the noble old man who was moving to meet him with words of cordial welcome, to glow with a brown flame as he fixed them on Margaret. She looked up half shyly under her long lashes; he could hardly see the colour of the eyes they hid, but his vision of the window stood before him in breathing flesh and blood, and Harry Marlowe, used to courts, tired of a world he knew too well, seemed to see a lost ideal once more in this child, as innocent as she was lovely. Not that he dreamed, at first, of offering this country beauty, his step-mother’s young *protégée*, anything but the admiration, touched with a fugitive thrill of passion, which such a face must rouse in any man not stockish and a tasteless fool. But he said between his teeth, to the bewilderment of those who caught the words, “By heaven! too good for the Popinjay!”

Courtier, even more than soldier, as Harry Marlowe

was, his manner had the bold unconventionality of a man who cares little what his company may think of him. Bowing low to Sir William, he addressed his first words to the girl on whose arm the old knight was leaning. "My fair lady, your humble servant greets you well," he said. "I heard of you from far; I saw you, all crowned with gold, leaning from the window to welcome me,—and yet I think you had no news of my coming?"

"None, my Lord," said Margaret, and she trembled: for now the strange hero had bent on his knee before her, and her hand lay small and warm on his long cold fingers, and was touched once, twice, by eager lips that seemed to leave a print of fire. Mistress Margaret felt herself flushing all over face and neck. The fearless young girl was now afraid to look up, to meet his eyes again, but she forced herself to one short, shy glance, and immediately the question thundered in her brain, "If this be only courtesy, what then is love?" She heard his voice speaking to her grandfather, but did not understand what he said, for the very realising of his presence seemed enough for her whole being; a power, sweet yet terrible, held body and soul.

Now, after some ceremonious phrases, Sir William and Lord Marlowe sat down opposite each other, while Margaret stood by her grandfather's chair with her hand on his shoulder; for some mysterious reason, the close neighbourhood of that faithful old love seemed the one safe place.

These three were not alone. Alice Tilney, staring and laughing uneasily, and Dame Kate, the old nurse in a great hood, stood behind Margaret in the shadow: and on the other side, the dark and pale face of Antonio, with his inscrutable smile, far handsomer than the Englishman, though lacking his distinction and attractiveness, hovered like a ghost behind Lord Marlowe's chair. The servants passed out one by one, leaving the end of the room in twilight; the fire crackled and

flamed, but neither it nor the two high candles were enough to light the large vaulted space. Only that central group of three, between the table and the fire, were very clearly to be seen.

Sir William talked with great satisfaction, and Lord Marlowe listened, with eyes no longer bent upon Margaret; for he was a gentleman, and would neither embarrass a lady nor neglect a venerable host. In the ears of all present Sir William talked of his will, and of the contents of the letter he had sent to Lady Marlowe. It seemed an immense relief to him to speak of all this to the person authorised to hear, whom it really concerned, for this same Harry Marlowe was one of his executors.

As he talked of his anxious wish to leave Margaret in safe and friendly keeping, Lord Marlowe kept his eyes bent upon the ground. He hardly looked up when he said: “But you will live long, Sir! You surely do not wish to part with Mistress Margaret before it is necessary? You do not wish to commit her now to my mother’s care? From your letter, my Lady thought that was the case, but I cannot believe it.”

“Fore God, I hardly know what I wish,” said the knight with a laugh. “I want her safe from knaves, and ’tis only fools that surround me. Your co-executors, my Lord, are as honest men as you will find south of the Trent; one of them is a saint, indeed, and the other two have wits enough to furnish four, but for all that they are senseless fools, swallowing every grain of gossip. And were I to die all of a sudden, as the apothecary warns me I likely shall, why, I could hardly trust these fellows to watch over Margaret till your mother was pleased to send for her. They are most likely to let a certain knave step in and carry her off, just because he is a good Lancastrian, his only merit,—ay, Mistress Alice, I know you are behind there, but a man may be on the right side and yet on the wrong—a Lancastrian and a brigand, eh?”

There was a short silence, for the knight's words might well be hard to understand.

"Do I follow you, Sir?" Lord Marlowe asked.

He lifted his eyes slowly, and there was an angry line across his brow. Almost as if against his will, he found himself looking at Margaret, not at her grandfather, and for a moment the girl met steadily those wonderful eyes, full of light from a world she did not know. Then apparently Harry forgot what he was going to say, forgot a momentary vexation at the hint that some country fools did not believe in the loyalty of his family, and would step in, if they could, between Margaret and the guardians her grandfather had chosen. He spoke no more, but fell into a dream. Sir William stared at him curiously. "You, then, my Lord, are the person with authority, whom I begged her ladyship to send here to me?"

"I am her envoy, no doubt," Lord Marlowe answered. "As to my message, my mission, we are not alone, and I——"

"You are tired and wet, I ask your pardon for forgetting it," said Sir William graciously, raising himself in his chair. "Tony, show his lordship to the guest-chamber,—tell them to bring wine and meat; you are overwrought, my Lord, you have ridden far. In the meanwhile, did I not hear something of letters from my Lady Marlowe?"

"Ah,—letters,—pardon me!" Harry's fingers wandered to his pouch, but did not open it. He rose suddenly to his feet and made a step towards Sir William. "You see me, Sir," he went on, eagerly, "your old friend's son. Think of me so, I beseech you, and not as the stepson of my Lady Marlowe. Let me stand alone; and now, let us be alone, Sir William."

A watchful look came into the old knight's eyes. The movement and the words, both eccentric, the dreamy manner, as of a man walking in his sleep—all this suggested a chilly fear that the parson might have been right after all, that Lord Marlowe's mind was not quite

evenly balanced. Sir William looked beyond his strange guest and met the eyes of Antonio, who stooped forward into the light, his lips moving, and shook his head warningly.

“We are alone, my Lord, to all intents and purposes,” Sir William said, with dignity. “My grand-daughter is here, the person most concerned,—you cannot, I think, have that to say which she may not hear—her old nurse, her trusted friend Mistress Tilney, and my secretary, who is to me as a son. Say what you please, my Lord!”

“Good! then I must repeat my task without question,” Harry answered very gravely, looking on the floor. “My step-mother, after debating how she could best carry out your wishes, instructed me to ask Mistress Margaret Roden’s hand in marriage for my——”

“Yourself, my Lord!”

Where did the words come from? They were spoken in a loud, strained whisper, which whistled on the air and almost echoed round the room. Every one started, and looked at some one else,—every one, except Lord Marlowe. He stopped short for a moment, then ended his sentence with the word, “Myself.”

The sensation in the room was extraordinary; the very silence thrilled with astonishment. Sir William opened his blue eyes wide, his mouth gaping in the depths of his snowy beard. Antonio shook his head again, smiling more intensely; it seemed, indeed, as if he checked a laugh with difficulty. Alice Tilney frowned, the picture of consternation. As to the two persons most concerned, they looked at each other across the glowing space that separated them. Margaret was trembling; the wonder of it all held her breathless, but the fear in her eyes had given place to a wild, incredulous joy. Could it be that this knight, this hero, was actually asking for her hand,—Meg Roden, so young, so foolish, so ignorant? How had it come about? There was some mystery

in it. However, so it was, and now Lord Marlowe's eyes, eager and adoring, were repeating the wonderful request to hers that met them so sweetly. Whether that strange whisper, coming no one knew whence, had been a fresh command or a bold guess at his intention, it had hit the mark; he now, at least, meant to ask and to have. After a moment's delay he repeated more loudly, though with a slight tremulousness, the word "Myself."

Then he made a step nearer Sir William, and bowed twice to him and to Margaret, who still stood with one hand on the old man's shoulder. It was plain that he expected his answer on the spot.

"You do us great honour, my Lord," the knight began, stammering a little in his surprise. "'Tis sudden, though—and yet, Harry Marlowe, the son of my old brother-in-arms, is the man I should have chosen out of all England—so my Lady guessed, I suppose. But, pardon me, 'tis sudden, my Lord."

"Sir, I am on my way to join the Queen," Lord Marlowe said. "There is no time for delays and circumventions; a soldier must snatch at his own life as he can, and you know it, no man better, Sir William. Let me hear from Mistress Margaret's own sweet lips that she does not hate me; then give me my wife to-morrow, and the next morning shall see me on my way. My mother shall fetch my wife home to Swanlea, either in person or by a trusty escort. You are satisfied, Sir William?"

He came nearer, bent on one knee close to the old knight's chair, held up his hand imploringly to Margaret, who instantly laid hers in it, for with him, it seemed, to ask was to command. Yet his manner was gentleness itself, the manner of a man never brutal, but always victorious.

"Good Lord! Madder than the maddest!" Antonio muttered in the background; but the smile died from his red lips and he turned a little pale. For the madman seemed likely to have his crazy way.

Old Sir William made an impatient movement. “Hear you, my Lord? You are too sudden,” he said. “Do you think my granddaughter can be married off like a beggar in a ditch? There shall be no such haste, I tell you. Why, five minutes ago, you could not believe that I wished to part with her at all. Your courtship has gained in pace amazingly. And you forget, Sir; you have not yet handed me my Lady Marlowe’s letters.”

Harry started up, smiling, and with a quick touch of the lips releasing the young hand he held. “You have the best of me, Sir, and I ask your pardon,” he said. “Letters, yes; but what are pen and ink but inventions of the devil for confusing men’s minds? As to those letters, which are indeed addressed to you and to this fair lady, they are needless now. I am my own ambassador.” He looked with a queer smile at the packet in his hand, stepped across the floor and dropped it straight into the reddest heart of the fire.

“I see it. I thought as much,” Antonio muttered. “Ay, my Lord,—‘too good for the Popinjay’!”

As the letters flamed, carrying their secret in smoke up the chimney, Harry Marlowe turned on the hearth, bold, graceful, laughing, to face the frowning brow and angry puzzled eyes of the old man in the chair.

But a great noise which had been growing for some minutes before, now stormed the shallow staircase and poured into the room. A crowd of Christmas mummers masked and in antic dresses, St. George, the Dragon, and the rest, with loud shouts and song and clatter of halberds and tin swords, prancing round in their time-honoured, privileged revels, effectually interrupted my Lord Marlowe’s love-making.

Chapter III

“ THIS HARRY OF MINE ! ”

MISTRESS MARGARET RODEN was walking home from church, which may sound like a tame statement, but is far from being so.

It was in the narrow street of Ruddiford, heaped with snow, and the time was between one and two in the morning. The sky was dark, no moon or stars visible, and a few large flakes of fresh snow had lately begun to fall, slowly, dreamily, as if they knew there was yet a long winter during which they might be multiplied a million times and work their will. But the street was lit up fitfully with the blaze of torches, the steadier flame of lanthorns, and all the population of small townspeople were abroad, with a mixture of fierce-looking men from the surrounding country. Most of them had been in the church, whose mighty sandstone walls and tower soared into silence and black night, while the shadowy interior was lit up with many wax candles, more than one altar glowing like a shrine. The midnight mass of Christmas Eve was just over. Nearly all the congregation had tramped out before Mistress Margaret left her pew and followed them through the great porch and down the stone-paved way out into the street, attended closely by her nurse and Alice Tilney, and followed by two armed servants in the yellow Roden livery. There was a good deal of noise in the street, for the Christmas mummers and revellers were still abroad and the ale-shops were open ; but no one was likely to molest the girl for whom most of Ruddiford would have laid down its life. Along the winding street that

led to one of the castle gates, where the low thatched roofs beetled over the way, Christmas greetings waited for her at every corner, and she might well have returned, safely and without interruption, to her grandfather.

But there was a spirit of unrest abroad, and Mistress Meg had her full share both within and without of his company. The first adventure arrived not far from the shadow of the church porch, from which several young men, muffled in cloaks over their short coats of leather and iron, followed her and her party down the street. The foremost of them put out a hand suddenly from the darkness and clutched Alice Tilney by the shoulder. She started, but did not scream, and indeed laughed a little, though nervously, as she lingered behind with this strange companion. The old nurse looked round with an angry exclamation; the two men servants, grinning, seemed to wait for orders, and the nurse, hurrying forward, spoke to her mistress.

“Meg, my child,” she said, “that godless dog Jasper Tilney, with his Fellowship, has stopped Alice from following you. Shall the men bring her on?”

Meg answered impatiently, and without turning her head: “Nay, nurse, leave her alone. No, what am I saying! Let them wait upon her. You and I need no guard.”

The old woman turned to the servants with a queer grimace. “Stop you behind, Giles and John. Walk after Mistress Tilney, when her worshipful brother has done with her.”

Then she hobbled forward in a great hurry, for her mistress’s young limbs seemed likely to outstrip her.

In truth, Margaret moved along in a state of such excitement that she hardly knew what she said or did. Even in church it had been impossible to keep her thoughts where she knew they ought to be, where, as a good Christian girl, well taught by Sir Thomas

the Vicar, they generally dwelt without difficulty. The child was horrified, when she remembered to be so, at the knowledge that a personage had stepped in between her God and her. A man's face came between her and the Holy Cradle she had helped to decorate. This was so great a fact that it could not be altered by any will of hers, but it made her conscience uneasy. It must be confessed, however, that she had a greater anxiety still. How would all this end? In the nature of things it might have seemed certain that her grandfather would have accepted for her, joyful and honoured, Lord Marlowe's offer of his hand. But Margaret, though only half understanding the circumstances, saw for herself that the way was not smooth. Sir William was not quite ready to open his arms to this new grandson. He had been glad of the interruption by the mummers, and when they were gone, he had refused to listen to a word more from Lord Marlowe, sending him away at once to rest and refresh himself after his journey. And when Meg had stolen round and looked in his face to see what he would say to her, he had turned his head away and waved her back with an impatient word. "Get you gone, child. No more to-night; you shall have my commands in the morning."

As Meg left the room, she was aware of words and smiles exchanged between Alice Tilney and Antonio. When they saw her look, they moved asunder, and she was too proud to speak to Alice on the subject. But she presently said to her old nurse, "What does it all mean?"

"Well, baby," the old woman answered caressingly, "this Lord is a fine man, but they say he's crazy. That's the talk, my dear; and sure there's something about him mighty strange. He is not like the rest of us, and if you are wise, you will not listen to all he says, my girl."

"Not like the rest of you? No, that is true! And

therefore crazy?" said Meg, and moved on smiling. Surely her grandfather ought to be above these foolish servants' fancies. They had never seen anything like him, therefore he must be mad. A clever argument, truly! Was he mad because he wished to marry her to-morrow? Well,—and Meg laid her cold hands against her hot cheeks, and determined for a moment to think of him no more. But she went on thinking of him, to the exclusion of every other thought, and now, as she paced the familiar old street on Christmas morning, the feeling that he must be somewhere very near kept her watching every turn, every corner, every shadow of gable or wall. She had not seen him in the church, but felt sure he had been there, like all other good men in Christendom.

And thus it did not astonish her to look up suddenly and see him walking by her side.

The church bells were clanging and clashing, but the rest of the noise they were leaving behind, and the place was lonely, for most of the castle people had already gone on, across the bridge that generally stood lowered over the deep narrow ditch, and under the low archway where the gate was set open. The water was frozen, the snow lay heaped against the ramparts and along a dark lane that ran at the back of some houses on the near side of the ditch, skirting it as far as the principal gateway, which commanded the west side of the town and the long bridge.

"Now, good Mistress Nurse," said Lord Marlowe, "go home to your bed and leave my fair lady to me."

"Not I, my Lord," replied Dame Kate promptly with a chuckle. "Your lordship had best go your own way and leave us to go ours."

"What, may I not wish you a Merry Christmas?" said Harry.

The old woman could not see well in the dark,—it was dark here, except for the glimmer of the snow—and truly she did not know what happened, or how her mistress was snatched from her side and borne

away suddenly out of sight. Margaret herself, in the magnetism of Harry's presence, hardly realised that he had lifted her easily, tall girl as she was, from the snowy ground, and had carried her some yards down the dark lane by the ditch, till, stopping out of sight of the street and the castle gate, he set her down on the low wall or course of large stones that divided the lane from the water. To make a dry place for her feet, he brushed the snow away from this parapet, and then, holding her hand and dress, stood looking up into the face now lifted above his own in the dimness.

"Forgive me, my angel! I had to speak," he said.

"Oh, my Lord, what are you doing!" Margaret murmured.

"It is of you I would ask," said Harry. "what are *you* doing? Why did you say that to me? God knows I'm happy to find myself at your feet,—I ask nothing better—but think what you have done! A man worn out, double your age, a soldier, the Queen's man, so bound to her service that I should have neither time nor strength nor heart for any other; and yet you call me to love you, sweet,—why?"

Margaret trembled from head to foot. "I do not understand you," she said, under her breath. "It,—it was no doing of mine. What have I said? You came,—you brought the letters——"

She stopped short, for the world seemed whirling round her. Harry felt that she was trembling, and held her more firmly.

"You are not afraid of me," he said, "and if you are cold, sweetheart, I will not keep you long. What did you say, you ask? While my step-mother's message was on my tongue, you changed the very word I was speaking. You bid me put myself in the place of my brother. Can you deny it?"

The girl was too bewildered to speak.

"Have you so soon forgotten?" he went on gently.

"You said,—in a whisper, 'tis true, but I heard it well enough—'Yourself, my Lord.' Could a man fail to answer such a challenge from such lips, Mistress Margaret? I looked at you, and you smiled. I read in your eyes that I was right, that I had gained your favour and the prize might be mine. What wonder that I fell under such a temptation? The rest,—I do not believe they even heard you. None of them knew what happened. It was what it may remain,—a secret between you and me."

"Ah! Why did you tell me?" the girl murmured. "It was not, then,—it was not what you meant—and Lady Marlowe——"

"My Lady offered you the best match in her power, for your grandfather's sake and for reasons of her own. She offered you her own young son, my brother Richard. As for me, I was out of the question. Who should dream that an old fellow like Harry Marlowe should wish to marry,—the Queen's man, hers only till now, and with troubles behind him and before! So I came gaily to plead young Dick's cause. When I saw you at the window, my heart misgave me as to this mission of mine. When you spoke, taking captive the very words on my lips, I was conquered, and became a traitor. But poor Dick has not seen you, and I shall soon make my peace with my Lady. She has twitted me with my solitary ways, many a time. If I have at last seen the lady of my heart, who shall say me nay?"

"But why did you tell me?" Meg said more loudly, and her hand rested heavily on his shoulder.

Looking up in the darkness at the pale face just above him, he answered, his deep voice a little uncertain: "I believed that you partly knew already,—and then, sweetheart, I half repented me of what I had done. Even now, if you command, it is not too late. Now that you know all, take your choice between us. Dick is a handsome lad; his mother has cockered him, but he is a bold fellow for all that,—a better mate for you,

Mistress Margaret, than this Harry of yours, with the freshness of your own age, and a whole life to give you instead of half a one."

Meg thrilled as he spoke. "This Harry of mine!" she said, so low that ears a yard away would not have caught it.

"Ah! Then stoop your face to me, Meg!" he said, and caught her to his breast.

As she lay there, she presently found breath to whisper, "But I never said it!"

"What!" he cried, starting. "You never said, 'Yourself, my Lord'?"

"Surely not! How should I have been so bold, so unwomanly!"

"Then who said it, if not you? Did you hear it?"

"Yes,—I believe so—but I cannot tell where it came from."

"The devil!" said Harry Marlowe, thoughtfully.

"No, my guardian angel!" she softly replied to him.

A pair of lovers in a lane!—though the lovers were ill-matched, at least in age, and though the lane was not grassy and sweet, with oak-trees shading it, and wild roses waving over it, but a dark, ditch-like way filled with snow, evil-smelling, bounded by black towering walls and the half-ruinous backs of poor and grimy houses. It was all the same to Lord Marlowe and his love. Meg might have known him always, loved him always, such were the peace and trust with which she rested in his arms, warm in the bitter cold of that Christmas morning,—yet it was not twelve hours since they first met. If the saw be true, *Happy's the wooing that's not long a-doing*, Harry and his Meg should have been in bliss for evermore. But to outside eyes that lacked understanding, this adventure was proving my Lord without questio mad. Was this the way that noble ladies were sought and won? Good and evil were ready for once to join in opposition to this wild autocrat of a lover.

Faces began to peer from black alleys between

the houses, a glimmer of cautious lanthorns pierced the darkness. Two parties were approaching, with noiseless feet on the snow. One came up from the street, where Dame Kate, crying and wringing her hands, had drawn together both townspeople and those of the castle who heard her complaints. Among these was Antonio, who hurried down, eager yet prudent, ready to take command yet very conscious that this crazy lord might not be good to approach. However, it was quite certain that he could not be allowed to carry off Mistress Margaret Roden as though she were a peasant-lass who had taken his fancy. Who would dare tell Sir William? And even now he was waiting to see his granddaughter on her return from the midnight mass.

The little group was joined by those two worthy men, Simon and Timothy Toste, whose house was not far from the town-gate of the castle. Then Alice Tilney hurried up, flushed and frightened, having somehow missed the servants, and hoping to overtake Margaret before she went with Christmas greetings to her grandfather. Alice screamed, wringing her hands as wildly as the nurse herself, and was going to rush alone in pursuit of her lady, but a word from Antonio brought her back.

"Patience, Mistress Alice, you will make a scandal," he said.

"What! and leave Mistress Meg in the hands of a madman?" Alice cried. "Scandal! 'Tis made already. He went that way, Nurse? Why, he may have carried her away into the forest. He's raving mad, and you know it, Antonio; Sir William knows it too. To see him burn those letters! On my life, you are a coward, if you will not follow me and rescue her!"

Antonio shrugged his shoulders. "My Lord is a fine swordsman," he said; and little Simon Toste, his smiling face quite pale and drawn, stepped forward with Timothy at his elbow.

"Therefore unarmed men are the fittest to deal with him," he said with dignity. "Stand back, young people. My brother and I will follow Mistress Margaret down the lane. Come, Timothy, you have your lanthorn. Notice, friends, the effect of Sir William's obstinacy. He would not listen to our worthy Vicar, who warned him to avoid these same Marlowes like the pestilence. Ay, Nurse, come along with us, and you too, Mistress Tilney, if you will. You are better out of the way, Master Antony. Moral measures are best, and you might whip out a weapon, with all the respect you have for his Lordship's sword."

Antonio showed his teeth; but the little apothecary's malice was not worth resenting. "Moral fiddlesticks!" he muttered. "If my Lord will give her up to you pompous pair of asses, he is idiot as well as madman." Then he gave the low whistle that always brought Alice Tilney to his side. "Let them go," he whispered. "We'll do better;" and he kept her standing still a moment, while the two worthies and Dame Kate, with a few gaping hangers-on from street and castle gateway, hurried away along the lane.

Alice came very close to the Italian. He took her two hands and squeezed them hard, till she winced with the pain. His face looked very white and his eyes shone in the darkness. "Where is Jasper?" he said.

"Not far off. I left him this moment, swearing to stop the marriage, by fair means or foul."

"Any with him?"

"Four or five."

"Go back to him. Tell him to take the other street, and fall upon them from behind. He will understand; a madman ought not to be at large."

"Tonio,—I fear—he might kill my Lord, and carry her away!" The words were breathed in Antonio's ear, as if the girl was afraid to speak them.

"Ah! He will not touch him till we have her

safe, or else my dagger shall find his heart, Alice. I shall be there."

"He will not take orders from you. Tonio, how angry he would be! But you are cold and cruel sometimes! I could even fancy——"

"Get you gone with your fancies! Is this a time for kissing, little fool! There, if you will have it,—now be gone!"

"But you are so cold," Alice murmured, as she ran laughing away.

Antonio waited a moment, listening, then stole with light feet down the lane.

Harry Marlowe and his young love had lost count of time and consciousness of place; there, standing together in the snow, they vowed between kisses never again to be parted. Perhaps for any sober, ordinary English lass of gentle birth, hedged in, as such usually were, by all kinds of stiff restrictions, the passion of so wild and romantic a lover would have meant as much fear as joy. But Margaret was a child of the South: the sun of Venice had warmed the blood of her ancestors; and the girl who owed her stately young dignity to English training had a nature of Italian fire underneath, which the foreign life and habits of her English father had done little or nothing to nullify. Thus the world of new feeling into which Harry Marlowe brought his suddenly chosen bride was to her even more beautiful than amazing. Her passion was ready to rise to the height of his own; she was his, without an afterthought; even conscience had ceased to trouble her now. They knew and agreed that the golden moment, when she leaned radiant from the castle window to watch him riding wearily across the bridge, was the supreme moment that decided all their future lives.

And yet Margaret Roden was no fool. She knew, and told herself plainly, that in some indescribable way this Harry of hers was different from other men. And she had not forgotten old Kate's words,—“a

fine man, but they say he's crazy." If there was anything in the absurd accusation, she could only add: "Then give me a crazy lover, for I might not feel this trust and safety with any reasonable man. And if he's crazy, why, he wants my love the more, for he must be unhappy, and I'll comfort him. In his senses or out of them, I am yours and you are mine, Harry!"

They had now agreed that Sir William must be persuaded to consent to an immediate marriage,—it would not be very hard, Meg thought, knowing her grandfather—and then, she was very sure that Harry should not leave her behind, for she was not afraid of a long journey on horseback, and she would ride with him to join the Queen.

"Nay, nay, love," he murmured, "you will be safer at my house. There may be hardships on the road, and then——"

"But I want to see the Queen; you know, she is my godmother, she gave me my name. She will be glad to have two servants instead of one. If you are her man, I will be her woman, and we will both fight and work for her; will we not, Harry? No, indeed, you shall not leave me behind. You would have to tell her Highness, and she would be angry, I know."

Harry laughed to himself. "Angry! trust a child for guessing right!" he muttered, and then he pretended to be stern, and told Meg that his wife must obey him.

"In everything, except in living without you," she said. "But forsooth, if you mean to leave me behind, I will not marry you!"

"Forsooth, will you not, fair lady?" and the argument had to end in kisses.

Suddenly Meg tried to escape from the arms that held her, but they only tightened their grasp, till the stealing lights came nearer, and the faces peered through the dimness, and the low chatter of well-

known voices reminded her of the world she had forgotten.

"Do not shame me before these good people," she said imploringly in her lover's ear.

So, when Simon and Timothy, two quaint black figures in high hats, and Kate the nurse, and a few townspeople in the rear, paced up reproachfully to these lovers in the lane, they were received by a gentleman and lady with mild surprise and perfect dignity.

Chapter IV

FAIR FACE AND FALSE TONGUE

WHEN Mistress Meg came back to the castle after her morning adventure, she was not over sorry to find that her grandfather had gone to bed, objurgating Sir Thomas for the length of his mass, and too weary to wait for her greetings.

Meg lay for a few sleepless hours, then rose and attended the Christmas service in the castle chapel, wondering a little that she saw and heard nothing of Lord Marlowe. She would not speak of him to Dame Kate, still less to Alice Tilney, and it was in silence and with long faces that they both waited upon her. If the truth were told, while the old woman was angry and anxious, Alice was afraid.

When at last Margaret was called to her grandfather, she told them both to stay behind, and went into his room alone. Now the cold white light of the snow was streaming in, but the glory of the evening before was all gone; a fresh fall had covered streets and fields inches thick. Sir William stared gloomily at the crackling fire, and his Christmas welcome to the child of his heart seemed weighted with the heavy chill of the day.

She knelt and asked for his blessing: he gave it absently, lifelessly; and then she sat on a stool at his feet and looked up into the kind old eyes that gazed strangely upon her. "Does he know?" the girl said to herself. "Have the mischievous wretches told him? Could they not leave it to me? Have I ever deceived him, and will Harry make me begin now?"

But one might very courageously ask one's self these questions, and yet find it difficult to brave Sir William's fierce anger, if he had resolved to send Lord Marlowe away rejected. Meg waited for what her grandfather might say. The old face softened as it bent towards her, though a certain sadness and bewilderment remained.

"Ay, to be sure! My pretty Meg has come for her Christmas-box," Sir William muttered; and the girl said to herself, with a touch of dismay in spite of all, "No, they have not told him,—and I must."

"There is only one Christmas-box I want, grandfather," she said hurriedly, as the old man stretched out his thin hand, on which the veins stood out like cords, to take a box of Eastern wood from the table near him. "Give me nothing else, pray,—" for he hesitated, looking at her, but with no sign of anger, so that she went on boldly, though her beating heart sent the red blood flying into her face. "I mean, if you will not give me that,—that which I want—all other gifts are nothing, for the convent will be the one home for me. Grandfather listen, wait and listen; may I choose my husband?"

Sir William did not answer instantly, but his look became heavier under Meg's imploring gaze. Without a word he took the box, opened it, and lifted out of their velvet nest several strings of large and most beautiful pearls. With their rich creamy lustre, which seemed to suggest a world of colour more wonderful than that of rubies and emeralds, they glowed in the grey and chilly room. Sir William flung them round Margaret's neck, tenderly touching her brown hair.

"These are yours, pearl of pearls," he said. "They were your mother's before you. As to husbands, what do you know of them? Leave such choice to your elders, pretty one!"

Meg took the old hand and laid her cheek against it, while she caressed the jewels that so well became her white neck.

"If your choice agrees with mine, grandfather!" she said. "Tell me, of your goodness, what will you say to him?"

"What? To Harry Marlowe?"

There was a touch of threatening, almost a growl, in the old man's voice. Meg only answered by slightly turning her soft cheek and touching his hand with her lips.

"'Tis this Marlowe you want for a husband?"

The reply was the same.

"Now may Our Lady and all the Saints teach me what I ought to do, for I shall soon be as mad as Harry himself," said Sir William, and he trembled as he spoke. "Meg, my lass, I was warned weeks ago to have nothing to do with this man. I would not believe Sir Thomas, when he told me 'twas common knowledge he was crazy. I left his name in my will as executor,—right or wrong, the Lord knows; but when I wrote on your affairs to my Lady his step-mother how should I know she would send him, as he says she did, to ask you in marriage?"

"What could she do better?" said Margaret.

"What fault have you to find with him, grandfather?"

"Fault! What fault? Why, that he is crazy! Is the lass so blind as not to see that? Cupid has bandaged your pretty eyes, truly. A handsome man, I grant, but old enough to be your father, and with the queerest fashions of his own. To see him burn those letters,—now why, I ask you, should he burn them at all? It was a mighty strange thing to do. 'Fore God, I never saw a crazier thing. Tony finds a way to explain that, but I don't like it any better. 'Tis a choice between craft and craziness, it seems to me; and I shall not give my Meg to a crafty man or to a crazy one."

"But you will give her to Harry Marlowe," said Meg, very low. "You will give her to him as he asks you, this very day; and she will ride north with him to serve the Queen, her godmother."

"Why, on my faith, madness is catching, it seems!" the old man said, and fairly laughed. He put his fingers under her chin, and turned up her face to his. It was blushing and proud, the white teeth just showing in a defiant smile, the lovely brown eyes full of fire. It was the face of a woman desperately in love, who meant to have her own way. To such a face, the will of an old grandfather was likely to signify little. "You have set your fancy on this man?" Sir William said, growing grave again as he looked at her.

"My fancy?—nay, my heart and soul!" she answered him. Then she added, "It is because they cannot understand him that they call him crazy."

"Tony finds him not so hard to understand, yet he makes me like him none the better."

"Tony! What has Tony to do with him?" the girl said scornfully. "Cannot you then believe me, the only one who truly knows him?"

"And how, my fair mistress, do you know him better than your elders do?"

"Because I talked with him in the street as we came back from midnight mass, grandfather."

"You talked with him in the street!" a cloud of anger was gathering on the old man's brow, his eyes were darkening before the storm. "Where was your nurse,—Alice Tilney,—the men who attended you?"

"I left them. I went with Harry aside into Ditch Lane, and we—we talked with each other."

Sir William swore an oath which half choked him, and tried to rise, pushing the girl from him, but she clung to his knees. He wrenched himself away from her, made a few faltering steps and leaned upon the table.

"Where are they all?" he cried. "They shall be put in the dungeon, every one of them! Giles and John deserve hanging! I'll send home Mistress Alice to King's Hall,—I should have done it long ago. As to old Kate, she may beg her bread on the roads,

for I will have her here no longer. What, cannot my grandchild walk safely through my own streets? 'Fore God, 'tis time I was dead! but how will things be bettered then? Alas, my sons dead before me, how can the house fail to fall into ruin? Where is Marlowe,—villain more than madman—thou hadst it, Tony! Ditch Lane at night! fine doings for a gentlewoman! By Heaven, were it for her misery, as it will be, he shall marry her now,—and with my curse! Nay, old fool, no such haste——”

His wandering eyes fell on Meg, still kneeling by his chair, and in that noble young face he saw no shame or tragedy, but only distress at his anger, unmixed with fear. The girl's look was so high, so innocent, that a sudden change came over his erratic spirit. From almost weeping with rage, he broke into a nervous laugh, and cried out: “Thou naughty lass, why frighten the old grandfather so? But mark my words, no more walking in dark lanes with my Lord Marlowe or any other lord,—and those who were with you shall have a trouncing. He talked with you,—what did he say to you? Some of it I can guess, more's the pity.”

Meg did not answer at once. She rose to her feet, came to her grandfather and linked her arm in his. Leaning heavily on her, he hobbled back and sank into his chair once more. She stood near him, tall and wonderfully beautiful, the Venetian pearls gleaming on her neck: she might have stepped straight, in her young majesty, out from some ancestral palace that mirrored itself in the great canal.

“What did he say?” the old man repeated. “That my lass was fit to be a queen?” Ay, we know that. But in his own doings there seems some mystery. Is my Lady of one mind with him, or is this a mad fancy of the moment, as Tony thinks? He talks of hesitations, of whispers,—I know not what; he asks, why burn the letters, if they were the authority for his suit? He talks——”

"Oh, what is Tony to him or to me!" Margaret said impatiently, her own quick spirit mounting in her face. "Send for him,—speak to him face to face."

"Faith, and so I will," Sir William cried. "Tony, art there lad?"

Margaret started slightly and looked round. The Italian glided out from a shadow behind the window, where the heavy curtains made an even deeper gloom. He had been sitting at a table, with a parchment before him, bending over it, so apparently absorbed, so utterly still, that no one would have guessed his presence there. He came with a laugh on his lips, which died away as he was touched with the haughty anger of Margaret's eyes. So he had been there, eaves-dropping! he had heard all she said to her grandfather, and the thoughtless old man had not cared enough for her dignity to warn her. Yet it did not much matter; she was ashamed of nothing she had said.

Antonio's face changed as their eyes met; he turned a little pale, with an imploring look, as he passed her to stand before Sir William.

"Why did not you speak?" she said sharply, but very low.

"Was my speech needed?" he murmured in answer.

"Yes, to explain your odious thoughts," said Meg, and she stamped her foot on the floor.

Antonio came a step nearer, bent on one knee, took the hem of her gown and put his lips to it; then he looked up straight into her eyes. "You blame your old playfellow!" he said. "And if I am right, fair lady, what am I doing? Only paying tribute to a charm that drives men to strange expedients; at least, so is my fancy."

"Come, Tony!" cried Sir William. "Make your peace another day. Go now to my Lord Marlowe and ask his presence here."

The Italian sprang up and left the room without another word.

Meg looked uneasily at her grandfather; it was on

her lips to complain of this betrayal, to ask why he had allowed her to suppose them alone, to pour out her heart to him in the presence of Antonio. But the weak flush on the old, agitated face seemed to silence her. It was only Antonio, after all, once the kind, clever playfellow, with whose Southern nature, low-born as he was, she felt a sort of kinship in this cold England, her father's country. There had been a time, not so long ago, when as growing boy and little girl the two had been inseparable. Now, since Alice Tilney had come, it was different. Antonio, her grandfather's servant and secretary, was no longer her brother and companion. He often made her angry now, and she despised him for certain of his ways; neither did she quite trust him. The somewhat fawning manners of the man, his watchful eyes, his curious smile; all this was an unpleasant change from the devoted, sweet-tempered boy of former years. His very beauty, when she looked at him now, was disturbing, repulsive. But these feelings had been of the vaguest, developing without her knowledge as time went on, devoid of any consequence,—for what was he to her?—till this Christmas day woke them to activity. How dared this Tonio interpose his slim presence, his cunning explanations, between herself and Harry and her grandfather!

As she moved away to the window and stood there, looking down on the white deserted bridge, where fresh snow had covered up the footprints of the night and early morning, she was conscious of a great anger against Antonio, and it poisoned even the joyful memory of the evening before,—the golden world, and Harry Marlowe riding in, weary till he reposed in the welcome of her eyes. Then she said to herself:

“Why this uneasiness? The wretch Tonio has guessed something of the truth, but what signifies that? Harry, if he will, can tell my grandfather all he has told me, and we three can settle the matter without interlopers. If I have to drive him out myself,

Tonio shall not be here. Strange, that Harry does not come ! How long, how long, my Lord, my love ! where are you ? ”

It seemed as if an hour might have gone by. Sir William closed his eyes, half dozing in his chair. The fire blazed up and lit the shadowy corners of the room. From the snowy fields beyond the river any one looking up would have seen Margaret's figure standing in the window, dark against the cheerful glow. At last in her impatience she turned, stepped down upon the floor, and paced up and down with her eyes upon the door, the pearls shining softly as she moved. Once or twice she stopped and said,—“ But where is he ? Why does he not come ? ” and then she walked up to the door as if to open it, hesitated, turned back and looked at her grandfather. “ I will not anger him again : he is too weak,” she said. “ But oh, how can I wait longer ! ”

At last a quick step sprang up the stairs, a hand was on the door. Margaret paused in her walk, pressed her fingers to her heart for a moment, and stood quite still near her grandfather. She knew it was not Harry Marlowe.

Antonio opened the door without noise, and glided into the room. He gave her one glance, a very strange one ; she thought afterwards that it spoke of both terror and triumph. Then he went up to Sir William and knelt down beside him, so that their faces were on a level. Margaret looked from one to the other.

“ I have unexpected news,” he said. “ 'Tis a mystery that no one can explain. Lord Marlowe is gone. It seems that he went north on foot very early this morning, when most of us were sleeping after the midnight mass. No one even saw him leave the castle, and he must have gone with some country people through the town gate. His men followed him two hours later. A gentleman came to Ralph the guard, who had charge of the west buildings where they slept, and brought a message from my Lord that they were

to break their fast quickly and follow him on the north road, bringing his horse with them. They went while the town was still asleep ; only a few saw them go."

Sir William stared wildly, still but half awake. Margaret stood like a stone, till she met the upward glance of Antonio's eyes. Her whole nature rose against that look of his. She threw out both hands, crying suddenly "It is false ! He is not gone !"

Antonio looked down, his beautiful mouth curving softly into a smile. "I am a miserable man, to bring you such tidings," he said ; "but it is truth, dear mistress !"

"I do not believe it," Meg repeated. "His men gone, you say ? A gentleman with a message ! What gentleman ? Who brought them the message ?"

"Ay, ay, Tony, who brought the message ?" Sir William asked fiercely.

He had suddenly awoke to his full senses. With a hasty movement he seemed to spurn the young man from him, so that Antonio, springing to his feet with an angry flush, stood back a pace or two. Sir William put out his right hand and caught Margaret's left as she drew a little nearer to him.

"I cannot tell, sir. Ralph did not know him," Antonio answered.

"Go, fetch Ralph, and come back here."

"What has happened, grandfather ? What will you do ?" Margaret said trembling. "Oh, there is some villany abroad. I fear,—I fear——"

"My poor Meg, I fear you must be convinced against your will," the old man said tenderly, caressing the hand he held. "Are not these the doings of a mad-man ? One day he arrives, he asks for your hand, in so strange a fashion that those who love you are driven to believe that there is truth in the stories they hear of him. Then,—what man in his senses, if he desired,—most unreasonably—to speak with you alone, would not have found a better place than Ditch Lane, a more seemly hour than one of the morn-

ing? And now,—to leave the town on foot, alone, over the moorland in the snow, without farewell to you or me, without my answer to his suit,—a message to his men to follow him northwards! If the man be not crazy, what is he, Meg?” The girl stood silent. After a moment Sir William went on: “I see it all, Meg. He is either crazy or wicked. Hark to what Tony thinks, what he warned me of last night. Nay, start not away so; Tony has a quick brain, and loves thee and me. When my Lord came into this room and set eyes on you, Tony heard him say,—to himself, as it were—‘Too good for the Popinjay!’ Ah, but hark a moment longer. When he began to ask for you in marriage, in his strange sudden way, Tony is sure that it was for his brother, not himself, he was speaking. But ’twas Tony who put his real thought into a word for him. ‘Yourself, my Lord!’ quoth Tony in a whisper,—did you hear him? Marlowe did, and took it up like a parrot or a popinjay! ‘Myself!’ says he. Talk of popinjays! ’tis the nickname they give Dick his brother, my Lady’s son. Poor woman, if she charged Harry to plead his cause, as Tony thinks, she was ill-guided enough. And ’twas a bold and a necessary thing for him to burn her letters. But the man’s a knave, if all this be true, and I suppose this morning he has repented of his knavery, and so gone on his way.”

“Ah!” Meg said quietly. “It was Tony who whispered? My Lord thought it was I.”

“What?” gasped Sir William.

But the girl quickly checked herself. If her grandfather was ready to blame Harry Marlowe for what Antonio, with more than good reason, guessed him to have done, it was not she who would prove it against him. Not a word of his passionate confession should pass her lips.

“All I can tell,” she said, low but very positively, “is that Lord Marlowe has sworn I shall be his. And

I am his for evermore. He has done us high honour, you and me. He is neither wicked nor crazy. If he be gone,—he is the Queen's man, and some messenger from the Queen must have called him secretly. He will come back, and I will wait for him upon my knees. But I am not sure ; I think he is not gone ; I think some evil——”

The door opened and Antonio came in, followed by a man-at-arms, whose stupid face was flushed with Christmas cheer. Margaret looked hard into the velvet shadow of Antonio's eyes—was he false or true ?—and suddenly she saw her lover's fate there. She made a step with hands outspread, faltered and dropped upon the floor, falling her length, with all her brown hair loose and long, at the feet of these men entering.

Later, when with tears and sobs from old Kate, and stony terror on the face of Alice Tilney, she had been carried away, still as if dead, to her own room, Sir William, his voice and his whole frame shaking, called Antonio to his side.

“Your pen, Tony !” he said. “Sit you down and write a letter to my Lady Marlowe. Ask the meaning of these things,—tell all that has come to pass, and how her mad stepson's doings have well-nigh killed my Margaret !”

“Ah, dear Sir, 'tis the shock, she will recover,” Antonio said in his softest voice, and smiled with an exquisite tenderness. “Let us wish Queen Margaret joy of her knight,—on his way to her !” he added inaudibly.

Chapter V

IN THE HANDS OF A FELLOWSHIP

THUS every one, except a few persons who knew better, supposed that Lord Marlowe had justified his nick-name that Christmas morning. For certainly it was only a Mad Marlowe who would have started on foot and alone in the dark, in advance of his men, through the wild moorland country, deep in snow, which lay for miles to the north of Ruddiford. The road was little better than a track at the best of times, winding up shoulders of heather-covered hill, between jutting rocks and steep-sided valleys. Wild characters haunted it, swarming out of the caves in its lonelier recesses. Even the traders and carriers who went that way with their pack-horses were wont to linger in the shelter of Ruddiford till they were enough in number to attempt the northern road with safety.

What had really happened was this. Instead of starting alone to the north, voluntarily, unaccountably, leaving the girl who had taken him captive with the sweetness of her eyes, the ruddy shining of her hair, and hurrying on to that other woman, royal, unfortunate, who claimed his entire devotion, Harry Marlowe had been dragged southward in unfriendly company.

When he parted with his love, and saw her walk away between the swinging lanthorns in charge of her old nurse and the worthies of Ruddiford, he lingered a few moments in the place where she had stood, and where the air and earth seemed to keep her presence still. With a quick wild movement he stooped and kissed the stones her feet had touched ; cold and damp they were, but to him as refreshing as grass in summer.

"For a few hours, a few hours only, my beautiful Meg!" he murmured to himself. "Then comes the climax of this sweet adventure. The old man shall give you to me, for I will take no denial. After all, as the world wags, I'm a better match than Dick, and he has no right to be angry. Now back to quarters, —to sleep, if sleep I may. Ah, Meg, to dream of thee!"

He walked down the lane towards the west gate, near which he and his men were lodged. Strolling carelessly, looking on the ground, with a murmur of loving speeches on his lips, as if the girl who called them forth were in his arms still, he knew nothing of the dark world round him till several men stepped out from an alley and barred his way, while a smoking torch flamed in his eyes and dazzled him.

Before him stood a young man as tall as himself, fair and desperate-looking, with red locks hanging down his cheeks and a drawn sword in his hand. Four or five more young fellows, armed to the teeth, wild and eager of look, crowded up behind this leader. Two more, creeping through darkness, stole up at Harry's back, so that he was fairly surrounded.

"Surrender, my Lord Marlowe," said the leader of the band. "Give up your sword, or—" he flourished his own.

"Who are you, sir, who venture thus to speak to me?" said Harry haughtily. "Plainly you do not know me. Stand out of my way, with your rascal companions."

There was such a fearless command in his manner that the youth who faced him shrank for a moment and hesitated.

"Jasper," cried one of the others suddenly, "he hath no sword!"

It was true. Harry had gone out to the midnight mass with no weapon but a short ornamental dagger, and wearing no defensive armour of any kind, but a velvet jacket and short furred gown and cap. Ever

careless, the thought of danger in these little streets of Sir William Roden's town had not so much as occurred to him. He had separated from his men, with the thought of following Mistress Margaret and gaining a word with her. Since then, no thought but of her had even crossed his mind.

"Ah! the insolent Yorkist!" cried Jasper Tilney. "He thinks he is in a land of sheep. He comes in with a fine swagger, takes the fairest of our ladies, and thinks to ride on his way. We are not worth a sword-cut, it seems. Come, my Lord, take mine, and a good blade too. You shall fight for Mistress Roden, or I'll kill you as you stand."

"Jasper, you fool!" hissed a voice at his elbow. "Why give him the chance of killing you? And we don't want a brawl in the street, here under the walls. Take him,—carry him off,—do what you please when you have him safe away."

The advice came from a slender man in a mask, the only one of the band whose face was hidden.

"Peace, foreigner!" said Jasper roughly. "Keep out of the way, there."

As he spoke, he pulled off a glove and threw it in Lord Marlowe's face, then flung his own sword clattering at his feet, and snatched one from the nearest of his followers.

"Yorkist—traitor—we know your lady step-mother is in love with March," he said. "The Queen will be better without such service as yours. Fight,—or be whipped out of the town."

"What does the man mean?" said Harry, with perfect calmness. "Before I kill you, sir, you will ask pardon for these insults and ribald lies. Have I fallen among a pack of highway robbers?"

"No, you have met a true lover of Mistress Margaret."

The words were loudly whispered, and made Harry start, for he was instantly reminded of the mysterious whisper—"Yourself, my lord," of the evening before.

"There are demons abroad,—or angels," he mut-

tered. Then, spurning Jasper's sword with his foot, he drew his small dagger and stood on guard. "If you fight like a gentleman, and alone, we are not ill-matched. Six or seven to one is heavy odds; still, I may account for some of you."

At first Harry contented himself with warding off Jasper's blows, which he did with marvellous cleverness and agility, even wounding him slightly in the left wrist, for Jasper was a rash and careless fighter. It is also to be said that he fought half-heartedly, and against the conscience which even this young ruffian had. His sword, his steel-guarded coat, against the dagger of a man dressed in velvet,—it was too like murder to please young Tilney, here a better man than any of his worthless Fellowship. But the prick on his wrist roused him, and also enraged his companions, who saw the blood dripping suddenly. Jasper gave a smothered cry, and aimed a more violent blow at Marlowe, who stepped back to avoid it. He was caught and tripped up from behind; a blow on the back of his head brought him down senseless, while Jasper, standing over him, swore furiously at his companions.

One pressed forward with the torch, the two who had stolen up behind knelt down by Harry to examine his hurt, and looked up half savagely, half laughing, into the angry face above them. "'Twas Tony's doing,—he signed to us," they said, and Jasper turned upon the masked Italian. "What are you doing, you black snake, pushing your false face between gentlemen! Why should we not fight it out as he willed it? He is worth all you crawling cowards put together. Is the man dead, you fellows?"

"Dead, no!" said one of them sulkily. "I did but fetch him a clout to quiet him,—and you had best hold your ungrateful tongue, Master Tilney."

"Come, be pacified, we are all at your service," Antonio said softly. "What are your commands? Shall we take him to Master Simon, who will bind up

his head and your arm,—or shall we go knock at the castle gate, and carry him in to Sir William and Mistress Margaret? Then you may have a good chance of acting witness at the marriage, if it be this day, as my Lord demanded, and they will scarce refuse him now. Patience, Master Jasper,” he added, as the young man glared at him; “’tis pity to quarrel with your best friends. This fight of yours could not have lasted long, here under the walls; some of the men would have looked out and spoilt your game quickly. You should thank me for stopping your foolishness.”

“What are we to do with him? Leave him here?” growled Jasper.

“If you wish the wedding to come off, leave him here by all means,” Antonio answered, and smiled. “There,—out with the torch,—take him up, two of you, carry him down to your horses, and away with you. You have ridden with a dead man before now, and he is but a stunned one.”

“Ay, but, Tony—Sir William, and she, will wonder that he is gone. What story——”

“Leave that to me; only keep him out of her way. This Yorkist,—as you were pleased in your wisdom to call him—he is the Queen’s man, her special favourite, and who will wonder if his first mistress has called him away from this new fancy?”

The young men did as they were advised. Antonio, his eyes gleaming through his mask, watched the group, as carrying the long form of Harry it stole between the drifts of snow. “If my suspicions are right, my Lord, he muttered, “they might drop you into the castle ditch and leave you there; not many of your own would mourn you.”

Harry Marlowe woke to deadly sickness and throbbing pain, with a discomfort so terrible that he, who knew what it was to bear wounds patiently, groaned aloud in spite of himself.

He was tied on a horse which was trotting roughly

along an uneven track, his head hanging down, striking each moment against the animal's shoulder, and so tightly bound as to be incapable of moving or raising himself. It was still dark, except from the glimmer of the snow. Up and down hill, it seemed, his captors carried him, at the same dreadful jogging pace. His head was bursting, his heart thumping violently. He was conscious that the horses were tramping behind and before ; he could hear the creak of leather and the rattle of bridles, the crunching tread of many hoofs upon the snow. Now and then a few words or a laugh passed along the troop that surrounded him, but on the whole this Christmas gambol of theirs was soberly gone through. A man was running at his horse's head, breathing hard, swearing sometimes and hurrying the beast on. Now and then a rough hand tried the cords and straps that fastened the prisoner. When Harry groaned for the second or third time, this man gave him a pull which jarred every nerve and muscle in his body, and panted as he ran,—“ Here, Jasper, my Lord's crying out. Must we silence him again ? ”

“ Alive, is he ? ” said Jasper Tilney from the front of the troop. “ Nay, let him alone, let him cry. We shall be home in ten minutes.”

“ He won't live so long,” said another, riding on the off side. “ His head's got twisted, he's nigh choking. Best see to him, if you want him alive at King's Hall.”

Another carelessly remarked : “ What use is the long-legged brute to you, Jasper ? Let him die a natural death, and drop him in old Curley's ditch,—food for the crows, and less trouble for you.”

“ Poor old Curley, when he finds him in the morning ! A text for the Christmas sermon ! ” laughed another.

The whole troop, following its leader, halted suddenly, and Jasper Tilney threw himself off his horse. “ You are a set of devils,” he said to them. “ I won't have the man die ; he is a brave fellow. Give me a knife ; cut these cords, and set him on his feet.”

But this was easier said than done, for Harry, his limbs stiff and cramped from the tying, his head dizzy and reeling with pain, staggered and fell in the snow by the roadside.

"Water!" was the only word he said.

"Here's water enough," muttered Jasper.

While his comrades looked on, some laughing, some discontented, he took a handful of snow, pressed some into Harry's mouth, and rubbed the rest over his brow and temples. In a few minutes the prisoner looked up with intelligence in his eyes. "Help me to my feet; I can walk or ride now," he said, and stretched out his hand to Jasper, who stared at him curiously.

Most men would have felt the degradation of such a state. To have been knocked down from behind, tied to a horse like a criminal, carried off a helpless captive, and now to be dependent for acts of the commonest humanity on a rival and an enemy, who had insulted him and done his best to kill him,—it was enough to burden a man with misery and shame. But Mad Marlowe was not made of ordinary stuff; he was too stately to be touched by shame. "Give me your hand," he said imperiously, and Jasper Tilney, staring hard and with a slow, involuntary movement, obeyed him.

Lord Marlowe stood upright, the men and horses thronging round. One had lighted a horn lanthorn, which did little more than give form and consistency to the shadows of that dreary winter dawn. The waste of fields stretched away, pale and dim, a few great trees, a clump of thorn or holly, just visible here and there against the snow-laden sky. The road, such as it was, seemed to lead on southward; but the troop, when they stopped to release him, were about to turn into a rough track across a broad field to the west, barred a mile or two away by a black barrier of forest.

"Where are you leading me, sirs?" Harry asked

with effort ; then he laid a hand on Jasper's shoulder and leaned upon him, which characteristic movement brought a grin to the coarser faces round these two.

"Now fight it out, sirs," said one of the men. "Remember, my Lord, Master Tilney spoke ill of my Lady your mother, and called you all a pack of Yorkists. If you are a good Lancastrian, you owe him a buffet for that."

"And he shall not have it from behind," Harry said, with perfect coolness, while the fellow who had struck him growled angrily. "Listen, Master Tilney, whoever you may be," he said to Jasper. "I still owe you a buffet, your friends say ; but I have paid something. I fetched blood from your left arm, did I not ? Yes, you have bound it with a kerchief."

"And he would 'twere Mistress Meg's, but 'tis not,—not yet, that's to come," said one of the band.

"Now learn a lesson," Lord Marlowe said, and turned to face them, still supporting himself by Jasper's shoulder, "you English Fellowship,—I would gladly speak to you as gentlemen, but never will I, so long as you bandy the names of ladies in your common talk—'tis the lowest manners of rascaldom,—Master Tilney, you at least should know better. I touched you with my dagger-point, did I not ? Answer."

"'Twas nothing but a scratch," Jasper growled hoarsely.

"Still, I did touch you. And you, or your friends, have hurt me so that I can scarce stand. Ay, we will fight it out one of these days, when I am myself again,—if I find you are worthy to fight me. But now,—what is this foolish game of carrying me off ? What do you want of me ? My money is with my men at Ruddiford ; I am on my way to join the Queen ; sooner than hinder me, you should ride with me to the north. Give me a horse now, and guide me back, one of you, to my men."

Jasper shook off his hand, and laughed fiercely. A chorus of angry laughter echoed his. "What do

we care, my Lord," he said, "where you and your men and your money are going? If you were a Yorkist, I'd punish you with greater pleasure, but I don't love you the better because you are the Queen's man. We care little for parties, nor are we thieves, I and my Fellowship here. You are insolent, my Lord, and I'd have you know you are speaking to gentlemen of the best blood in the Midlands."

"You amaze me, sir!" said Harry, bowing slightly to the company. "Then,—let me understand,—what is it you want of me?"

Jasper stared him in the face. His wild blue eyes, his flushed, daring face, made him look by far the madder of the two. "I want to—I swear to—hinder you from wedding Margaret Roden," he said between his teeth.

"Ah,—that, my fine fellow, you cannot do," said Harry, and smiled.

"Cannot I? We will see to that, my Lord. Come now, to prove I'm a gentleman, I'll trust to your oath. Swear to me, on the cross of this dagger, that you will never marry her, that you will ride north without seeing her again, and I will put you on my own horse and let you go your way,—ay, though every one of my comrades say me nay."

"We will not say you nay, Jasper," said the eldest and grimmest of the band. "We shall gladly be rid of his lordship, but Brown Bob is worth keeping; we'll find him a worse horse."

"I have spoken, Leonard," Jasper Tilney replied. "Now, my Lord, what say you?"

Harry Marlowe laughed lightly. "You expect me to swear that?" he said. "I will swear nothing, promise nothing. So much I'll swear, on your dagger's hilt or on any holy relic you may put before me."

"You value your life little, then!"

"What is life? the power to eat and drink? You take my life, if you take what I live for."

He stood pale and immovable, facing Jasper Tilney,

who hesitated, staring at him. In spite of the impatient growls of his companions, tired of lingering in the snow, he could do no more than threaten Harry. Strike him down in cold blood, unarmed and exhausted, though it were the surest way of disposing of a dangerous rival, he could not.

"That is your answer? You will repent," he said fiercely. "Here, tie him to my saddle. He shall run beside me to King's Hall."

"Good! Brown Bob is tired of standing,—he'll stretch his legs for him," said Leonard.

Luckily for Harry Marlowe, the going was very heavy and the distance very short. Jasper did not press his horse forward. The whole band plunged steadily on through the fresh snow, which balled so much that one or the other had to be constantly dismounting. Across wide desolate fields they came to a few miserable hovels crouching round a green, and from this a short steep hill led to a square-towered church in a churchyard bordered with snow-laden fir-trees. Beyond this were the high gables of a large house, entered by an archway with heavy gates and portcullis, and a walled courtyard with broad steps to the principal door. A faint misty dawn, spreading over that wintry world, showed all this plainly to Harry Marlowe's aching eyes.

As he strode wearily beside Jasper's horse, impatient now to reach his stable, and as they passed under the churchyard wall in the lane that led to the house, the white shaggy head of an old priest appeared over the wall.

"Merry Christmas to you, Jasper, and all my sons!" cried a shrill voice, something like the crowing of a cock in the icy morning air.

"Merry Christmas, father!" they cried in chorus.

"What brings you home so late, or so early? I have waited for you,—I feared, forsooth, to have no congregation. Hey, what prisoner have you there?"

"Oh, a fine prisoner, a guest of mine for the nonce,"

Jasper answered with a careless air. "Set your bells ringing, father. I thought we should have heard them half an hour since."

"Ay, ay," cried the old man, his dim, foolish, but anxious eyes fixed on the strange figure at Jasper's side. Then he turned away muttering, "I waited lads, I waited for you," and then, as the party rode on, they heard him shouting: "Robin, Dickon, Tom, where be you all? Strike up the bells, men; here be Master Tilney and his worshipful Fellowship."

A few minutes more, and the old tower quivered with the jolly Christmas peal; the ringers of King's Hall were famed in all the country round.

The young squire led the way into his house, through a confusion of barking dogs, hurrying women and boys, under branches of holly, ivy, and mistletoe, while a wandering harper played in the hall, and a smell of roast beef and spiced ale filled all the air.

The clashing and clanging of the bells, the great blazing fires, the laughing faces of the people, all spoke tidings of comfort and joy. Jasper turned to his prisoner, who stood silent, with bound hands, in the middle of the floor. Pale and proud, in spite of all the king of his company, Harry Marlowe waited for his fate. Jasper Tilney was angrily conscious of quailing under those dark eyes of his. "Hear you, my Lord," he said, with an attempt at a laugh. "They are ringing you a welcome to King's Hall."

"Nay, the welcome is not for me," Harry answered.

"I am not a brigand or a murderer. You shall have time to think, and a chance of saving your life."

Lord Marlowe lifted his brows and said nothing.

Jasper scowled upon him for a moment, then took a bunch of heavy keys from a nail, and saying, "Follow me," led the way up the broad staircase of oak logs that ascended from the hall.

The Fellowship looked after the two men till they disappeared, then put their heads together, crafty or dare-devil, as the case might be.

"Did you hear my Lord boast of his men and his money? I wager he is carrying sacks of treasure to the Queen. It will never reach her now,—why not share it? The west gate is poorly guarded, and the men may be snoring still."

"Why, they are twenty mile off by now. Was not Tony to cheat them into starting after their master on the north road?"

"Nay,—was he?"

"Surely, I heard him mutter a word in Jasper's ear. So it would take better legs than ours to catch them."

"Lazy lout!" Leonard said scornfully.

He was a big, violent fellow, towering over the others, and though inferior to them in birth and fortune, often inclined to dispute Jasper Tilney's leadership.

"Such words to me!" the other young fellow stormed, but his comrades interfered to stop the quarrel.

"Who will ride with me," said Leonard, looking round, to catch these fellows on the north road?"

"Without mass or breakfast,—and Doctor Curley, what will he say?"

"Let him say what he will; he knows he has not lambs to deal with. As to breakfast, we'll take that quickly,—and then away. No word to Jasper,—he can guard his precious prisoner. Look you, there are but few of these men, and they will not ride far. They will find no master on the road, and they will be back at Ruddiford while the day is still young. We will catch them outside the north gate. No need to go through the town,—we'll get across on the ice—'tis rough and snowy. Come,—who is for my Lord Marlowe's money-bags? They're better worth having than himself, whatever Jasper may say."

Chapter VI

THEY OF HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD

SWANLEA was one of the strangest and most beautiful houses in England at that day. It stood low down, flat on a meadow, and the hills rose about it, covered with forests of beech and fir. Round about it, back and front, a little river twirled and ran; a stream, though not the same, namesake and likeness of "my Lady Lea." To the south of the house, about which elms and cedars were grouped in stately fashion, this small river spread itself into a natural lake with an island in it, on which ivy and wild trees were now fast hiding the sturdy remains of a fortress much older than the present dwelling of the barons of Marlowe. This had once been a strong little place, defended by water and bridge and wall, though commanded by the hills all round.

It was the father of Harry, a man of large fortune and fine taste, a friend and companion of the Duke of Bedford, and thus touched by French taste and Renaissance fancy, who had dismantled the little castle on the island and had built the large, luxurious house which now nestled so confidently in the valley of the Lea. It would seem that he had not expected any war, foreign or civil, to disturb his repose there, for never was there a house more difficult to defend. But this former Harry, Sir William Roden's old friend and brother-in-arms,—though the men were most unlike—did not live to see England torn in the strife of the Red and White Roses. He died in peace at Swanlea, not very long after his second marriage with the Lady Isabel, whose tastes were even more

modern than his own and her freedom of thought very much wider.

He left two sons only—Harry, a youth of seventeen, and Richard, a child in leading-strings. These two were as different as their mothers before them. The first Baroness was a woman of the old world, of the Middle Ages now passing away. She gave largely to the poor ; she scourged herself and wore hair-cloth next her skin. She was a saint, but also a devoted wife and mother, though her life may have been shortened by anxiety for her husband's and her son's salvation. She was carried up the steep path to the vault in the old church on the hill, the path worn by her feet in pilgrimage, to grow mossy and deserted when she was gone. On her altar-tomb, the marble face looked up to heaven as if to say, "How long, O Lord?" while all the influences she hated reigned in her stead at Swanlea.

The house was very fantastic, crowded with towers and turrets : it was easy to see that its inspiration came from the Palais des Tournelles at Paris, where the Duke of Bedford had his quarters when he ruled there. Inside it was beautifully panelled in wood, or hung with rare tapestries and curtains ; there was a fine library, for both Lord Marlowe and his son and successor loved learning, like the best men of their day. Outside, the formal gardens were divided by high hedges of box and yew, cut here and there into quaint shapes of birds and animals ; live peacocks too, in summer, strutted on the lawns, and swans floated in the lake.

A crowd of well-trained servants made life run easily at Swanlea, and the house was furnished with every luxury of the time. Isabel Lady Marlowe held a kind of little court there, and with a keen eye for the winning side she secretly kept the friendship of the Duke of York and his attractive son, while her stepson, with men and money, devoted himself to the cause of Lancaster. Still, owing to her clever-

ness and his generosity, they did not quarrel. With Harry his father's wife, though out of sympathy with him, held the place of his mother, and though lord and master at Swanlea, he used his authority so little, lived so simply, and was so constantly away in attendance on his Queen, that it seemed as if the beautiful place were Lady Marlowe's to use as she pleased. For this liberality she repaid him by whispering that his eccentricity, which was undoubted, at times amounted to madness, and so the slander, encouraged by his own wild and careless ways, took form in the names by which half London and all the Duke of York's party knew him,—Mad Marlowe, the Queen's man.

The Lady Isabel, as they called her, was sitting in a small, high, beautiful room, lined with carved shelves of richly bound manuscripts. She sat at a desk, with letters spread out before her. The winter sunlight glimmered in through tall painted windows, and the burning logs on the hearth gave out a pleasant smell. Two greyhounds, with silver collars, lay on velvet cushions before the fire, and between them, on a larger cushion, lounged my Lady's son Richard, a young fellow of twenty, with a mass of curled yellow hair and a face touched up with paint. He yawned often, and touched a few notes on his lute; now and then he lifted large lazy eyes and looked at his mother.

With her there was no idleness, no personal luxury. Her black velvet gown fell in stately folds; her pale face, still beautiful, for she was further from fifty than Sir William Roden thought, was grave and marked by care. It was a curious face, with much brightness but no sweetness; sometimes stony in hardness and coldness, sometimes moved to smiles and laughter which were not always found reassuring by persons in her power. Sir William, in his blind confidence, knew almost nothing of the woman to whom he had been ready to entrust his dear grand-

child's future. He took the Lady Isabel on faith, as being all that his friend Marlowe's wife ought to be. He had only seen her once in his life, and that was before her husband's death, many years ago. In those days, indeed, Isabel Marlowe seemed to be a model of all womanly virtues, and a man would have taken his oath at any time, that she was what she chose to appear.

She read those letters again and again. She had read them, at intervals, for the last twenty-four hours, ever since they reached her from the fatal field where Queen Margaret had been victorious and had triumphed cruelly over Richard of York in his death. Outwardly, the traditions of the house of Marlowe obliged the Baroness to regard the news of Wakefield as good news; inwardly, it was an unwelcome check to her ambitions for herself and Richard her son. A personal friendship and mutual understanding with Edward Earl of March was not entirely the result of that fascination which women seldom resisted, and which it had amused him to exert on her, the mother of the stoniest of Lancastrians. Isabel would have laughed at the notion that she could be attracted by any man to her political undoing. Convinced that the future lay with the White Rose, she had a perfect scorn for Henry the Sixth, and a perfect hatred for Margaret of Anjou.

Some little curiosity found its way into the soft indifferent eyes of Richard, who seldom tried to understand his mother, and was still more seldom allowed to do so. She kept him in lazy luxury, childish and ignorant. Feigning to approve of the boy's half-conscious love and admiration for his step-brother, she never encouraged him to seek Harry's society. When Lord Marlowe was at Swanlea, some excuse was generally found to keep Dick out of his way. Hunting and hawking and all the other manly sports were frowned upon; when the lad, supposed to be

delicate and frail, escaped to join in them, less from any love of them than from the wish to gain Harry's good opinion, it was generally at the cost of his mother's displeasure. Men laughed at the weak, gaily-dressed fellow, and called him Popinjay. Even Harry's kindness was not always proof against a certain scorn for him, though he guessed at better qualities beneath. He had been ready to enter into the plan suggested by my Lady after she received Sir William Roden's first letter, of marrying Dick to the heiress of Ruddiford. Welcoming anything that might make a man of poor Dick, this country girl, thrown by her old grandfather into his mother's arms, seemed the very wife for him. A good Lancastrian connection, too, it would serve to steady my Lady on the right side, Harry thought, having little idea how far his step-mother's Yorkist leanings carried her. That she admired and believed in the Duke of York, he knew; but so did others who kept a dutiful loyalty to King Henry.

Lord Marlowe, as we know, had reckoned without the personality of Mistress Margaret Roden. But no news of him or his mission had reached Swanlea since he and his men rode away up the valley northward, a few days before Christmas; and it was now January.

"My lady mother," said young Richard, softly, "you pull a long face over the Wakefield battle and the death of the Duke, but is the news truly good or bad? Will it not bring the war to an end and set the King free to reign?"

"It may, Richard," said his mother. "But think you what that means,—the reign of a man of diseased brain, and the rule of a woman bloody, fierce, and cruel, who will treat all suspected of favouring York as she has treated the Duke himself and my Lord Salisbury and many more. My head and thine, Dick, may fall one day"—she smiled at him, and drew a pointed finger across her throat. "I have

enemies enough,—there are slanders enough abroad,—what do you say ? ”

“ I say, we Marlowes wear the Red Rose, and Harry gave me the Prince’s silver badge for my cap, mother. I care little for parties ; still, why should I lose my head for the colour of a flower ? ”

“ You care nothing and know nothing, silly Popinjay ! ” said Isabel. “ ’Tis waste of time to talk to thee ” ; and again she bent over the papers on her desk.

A cloud of sulky anger darkened the boy’s handsome face. He leaped up from his cushion, dashed his lute on the floor so violently as to break it, and stalked across the room to her, while the dogs lifted their heads, and one growled low. Richard turned and looked at him.

“ I will have that dog killed ; he hates me,” he said. “ All the rest love me, but that pampered beast of yours——”

“ Ah ! I have more than one pampered beast in my kennels,” said Lady Marlowe. “ When they begin to kill each other, the chaos will be too great. Why this flame of fury, Dick ? What have you to say to me ? ”

“ Why do you treat me so, mother ? I know more than you think. I am not a child, not even a boy, remember. I am a man. I shall be married soon, and lord of a castle.”

“ You know so much as that,” she said thoughtfully. “ Yes, ’twas a lucky thought, that marriage for you. That ancient place Ruddiford, with its old master and its traditions of Agincourt, all that may save your head and mine, Dick, in case this battle means real victory for the House of Lancaster. Queen Margaret may hear what she will, but I should be safe, I think,—Marlowe on one side, you and your Rodens on the other. Yes,—and in the other case, ’tis a strong position, worth much to either side ; in a certain way ’tis the key to the north, though

neither side has armed it, for I think the old knight must be well-nigh in his dotage. Something might be done, and if he were out of the way——”

“Are you talking of Ruddiford, my Lady?” Richard asked, frowning in impatient bewilderment as he stood before the desk over which she was bending.

She started slightly, and looked up with staring eyes, for he had broken in on a sudden train of thought which was carrying her far. “Go back to your dogs and your music, Dick,” she said. “Wait patiently. Your brother will send a messenger to tell us how his suit for you has sped. He has been long on the road, I fancy; he should be here now.”

Even as she spoke, there were sounds outside. A servant darted into the room. “A messenger from Sir William Roden.”

Lady Marlowe looked up, startled; this was not exactly what she expected, but she was not ill pleased. “Send the man in,” she said. “So, Dick,”—when they were alone for a moment—“Ruddiford is at your feet, it seems. Harry has done his work well.”

The boy laughed consciously, at once good-humoured again. He pushed a white hand through his curls, moved back towards the fire and threw himself into a chair, so that the messenger, coming in, should face both himself and his mother. This the messenger did, greeting them both with profound bows. They saw at once that Sir William had not sent an ordinary servant to carry his mind to Lady Marlowe, but a person of confidence, a person in whose air there was even something of the gentleman; so much the more complimentary. Richard smiled and blushed in spite of himself, at this important moment, and then tried hard to look dignified. Lady Marlowe, upright in her chair, met the messenger with a full, keen gaze from dark eyes that were wont to see through men. She was very pale and her lips, slightly parted, showed strong white teeth. He would be a bold man who tried to deceive such a woman. Yet now, if ever, the

Lady Isabel met her match, and she instantly felt it. The young man who entered might be a menial by position, though his plain riding dress bore no sign of this, but he was beautiful and clever beyond the range of ordinary men. The truth was that Sir William, more and more perplexed by the strange turn events had taken, had decided at last on sending his precious Antonio with the letter he had written to tell Lady Marlowe all, and to ask, on his side, for an explanation.

So now Tony found himself on his knees beside her ladyship. After a moment's delay,—what kind of man was this?—she gave him her white hand to kiss. It seemed, certainly, that he had been brought up as a gentleman, and, one must confess, among all the handsome young men who had ever courted my Lady in her varied experience, he took easily the first place. Nor was she by any means above making him aware of her admiration. In Dick's presence, however, there was no lapse from her ladyship's dignity.

As the young man stood up and waited for her to speak, she said very courteously, "Favour us with your name, Sir."

"Antonio Ferrari, your ladyship's humble servant. I am Sir William Roden's secretary."

"An Italian—of noble birth, Sir?"

Antonio flushed with pleasure, but answered very meekly: "No, Madam; but I was brought to England by Master John Roden as his page, and it has been my privilege to wait upon Mistress Margaret."

"As her page?"

"Her page, and playfellow, till Sir William took me specially into his service."

"Where, I suppose, you will remain?"

"Surely, Madam, unless my young mistress, when she comes hither as Baroness Marlowe, should command me to follow her."

Antonio spoke with such quiet correctness that

Lady Marlowe, occupied for the moment with himself, noticed nothing strange in his words. But young Richard was in a different case. The manner and the looks of Antonio had quite a contrary effect on his mother and on him. He disliked him from the first, thought him a presumptuous ape, and swore to himself that his wife should be attended by no such playfellows. He marvelled at the gentleness of his mother's manner to a foreign secretary fellow of no birth,—who, by the way, talked egregious nonsense when he was not telling her his own unnecessary history.

"You lie, fellow," Dick said coolly. "Have a care, Madam. This man does not come from Sir William Roden or he would know better what he is talking about."

Antonio gave him a quick glance, and went a little white, but did not speak.

"Why this discourtesy, Richard?" said Lady Marlowe.

"You did not hear him. He talked of Mistress Margaret Roden coming here as Baroness Marlowe. What did he mean?"

"Ay, what?" said she, and Antonio saw her eyes harden. "Have you any letter or token from Sir William, Master Secretary?"

Antonio instantly produced the letter he carried. "Madam, pardon me," he said, "but my master desired me to speak with you before handing you this letter, which is indeed the expression of his perplexity."

"What then perplexes him?" said her ladyship, as with a sharp little knife she cut the cord of the letter. "Let us see,—but before I weary my eyes with this long epistle, explain your words, Sir. For you also seem to be perplexed, and ignorant of facts. My son there is not Baron Marlowe, and Swanlea is no house of his, that he should bring his bride here,—except indeed by his brother's hospitality."

"Madam, I very humbly crave your pardon."

Antonio's tone was almost grovelling, but in his heart there was triumph. So! he had read the riddle right. There sat the Popinjay, cheated of his bride. How would they take the news, these two, who were not, he could see, over-burdened with scruples? A moment's fear touched him. Would my Lady punish the bearer of the news? Her unlikeness to Sir William's imaginary portrait was somewhat alarming, and for a moment he wished himself safe back at Ruddiford. However, the thing was begun and must be gone through with, as boldly as one might.

"I am miserable enough to have offended you, I do not know how," he said, bowing before her. "My mission is not concerned with your worshipful son, here present, but with my Lord Marlowe's suit to Mistress Margaret Roden, and with the strange manner in which his lordship left Ruddiford for the north, without even awaiting Sir William's answer."

Isabel lifted her fine brows and gazed at him, consideringly. Richard was beginning to stammer out some angry exclamation, but she checked him with a wave of her hand.

"Young man," she said, "I counsel you to pray to St. Antony, your patron, to grant me patience. With what foolish inventions are you filling our ears? If you truly come from Sir William Roden to me, you must know that my Lord Marlowe visited Ruddiford with the purpose of asking Mistress Margaret's hand for his brother, whom you see there. He bore letters from me to Sir William. This letter is surely a reply to them, and I make no doubt at all that Sir William accepts my proposal, and Lord Marlowe's. You are ill-instructed, Master Secretary, unless your ignorance be feigned. I cannot tell your object, but I advise you to beware."

Antonio, trembling, went down on one knee. "Madam, have pity, and be just," he said, with eyes that implored. "I can only tell you what happened ;

your anger is a mystery to me. Lord Marlowe arrived at Ruddiford on Christmas Eve. At once, in my hearing and that of others, he offered himself,—himself, I do solemnly assure you—in marriage to Mistress Margaret. There was no word of marriage with this gentleman,” he turned his head towards Richard, who suddenly laughed aloud.

“Is she beautiful, this Mistress Margaret of yours?” he said.

“She is a fair young lady,” Antonio answered, with lowered eyes.

“And Sir William? And my letters?” Lady Marlowe asked, with quick fierceness.

Antonio, still kneeling, with natural eloquence told his story. He made them present at the hurried interview, made them realise, with clever words and silences, the sudden passion that had seized those two, but left out, one need hardly say, his own whispered suggestion. Even now the success of that careless, mocking trick was partly a wonder to him. He made them see the packet of letters flaming under the dark chimney. He told them all; the interview in the street, Margaret’s morning request to her grandfather. Up to this point he told them the truth, and then deceived them as he had deceived his own master, so that they pictured the strange wild man hurrying away northward, his marriage half made, his asked-for bride left to passionate mourning, her grandfather insulted and perplexed. “The whole affair seemed to Sir William passing strange,” he said. “He felt that he could do but one thing,—lay it before your ladyship. Therefore, as no letter could fully explain it, he sent me.”

His voice faltered a little. Lady Marlowe, leaning on her desk, shading her eyes with long white fingers loaded with rings, watched him so that the young fellow, bold, cunning, but with little experience, shivered to the marrow of his bones; yet it was not quite with fear, but rather with the fascination of a

bird before a snake. He had been fairly sure that in all this strange business it would be wiser to find himself on Lady Marlowe's side. Now he seemed to know that this position might mean more than he had reckoned on.

"Madam, what shall we do?" young Richard's voice broke in roughly. "Must I lose Ruddiford? Can I now marry this woman whom Harry has left behind?"

"Peace, Dick," said Lady Marlowe. Then she looked again at Antonio. "Go and rest," she said. "Come back to me in the evening, and you shall hear my will." It was gladly enough that the Italian escaped from the room.

Then Richard Marlowe watched his mother as she read Sir William Roden's letter, smiling over it, but not pleasantly. There was something in her look which kept the young man silent till she had done.

"Yes, Dick," she said at last. "And they say that your brother is not mad!"

"Nor is he, mother! I do not trust that foreign fellow. It may be all a string of lies."

"But with what object? No, he has told the truth,—or part of it. I would put him to the question, but the boy is too pretty," and she laughed.

"His face does not please me; 'tis black and villainous," said Richard. "But, mother, I counted on being master of Ruddiford; you had promised it to me. Will Harry come back from the wars and marry this maiden, and take the castle and estates for himself? And all without a word to you and me?"

"I suppose," said Lady Marlowe, "after this Wakefield battle, the Queen and Harry will do as they please. But do you obey me, Dick, and you shall yet be master of this fair girl and of Ruddiford. And Ruddiford shall be for you, my Lord Edward, my White Rose King!" she muttered, when the boy, shaking his curls and shrugging his shoulders, had strolled off and left her. "This Italian has qualities that will serve; I must make a slave of him."

Chapter VII

HOW THE LARK SANG AND THE MOUSE SQUEAKED

MASTER ANTONIO rode in the cavalcade with a rich jewel round his neck, the gift of my Lady Marlowe. She had gained and bound him to her service with all the arts she knew ; and her power was a kind of witchcraft, independent of age and of beauty. The influence was mutual, for with honest and simple natures she could do nothing, except by sheer physical terror. Thus her stepson Harry was absolutely independent of her, not even realising the carefully hidden evil in her character. Richard was a child, often a rebellious one. Young Edward of March, a Renaissance prince, found nothing strange, but much that was attractive in the glimpses of herself she chose to show him. Very gladly would Isabel Marlowe, though old enough to be his mother, have taken the place afterwards held by Elizabeth Woodville in Edward's life. It would seem that Lancastrian widows and the heir of York had a natural affinity.

It suited my Lady's plans to keep Antonio waiting upon her at Swanlea till the early days of February, sending a man of her own to let Sir William Roden know that she would shortly visit him. It seemed to her, she said, that this complicated affair must be arranged in person. In the meanwhile, she expected every day a messenger from Lord Marlowe, who was supposed to be working his way south with Queen Margaret's victorious army ; but Harry was silent. Then came the news that Edward of York had won a

battle at Mortimer's Cross, and that the Queen, in spite of this, was in full march on London. Lady Marlowe delayed no longer. Ruddiford, the key to its own quarter of the Midlands, became a more and more desirable outpost. If she and her party were unlucky enough to meet the Queen's force, or stragglers from it,—why, there was Harry, the Queen's man, to vouch for his mother and brother. And he owed them too much explanation, too much atonement, not to acknowledge their claim to the utmost. If, on the other hand, the Yorkist army should cross her path, my Lady Marlowe would feel that the time was come to cast off all disguise. Edward should know that she was on her way, with her son in her train, to capture a strong place for him.

Her ladyship travelled in her own carriage, a long covered waggon, with panels and wheels curiously painted and gilt, the interior being luxurious with cushions and tapestries. Four strong horses dragged this structure through the miry ways. Though the jolting was frightful, Isabel preferred it to the swinging movement of a horse-litter, which followed with her waiting-women. Master Richard divided his time between lying full length in the carriage, trifling with his little dogs and his lute, and riding, gaily tricked out with jewelled arms and velvet garments, in advance of the escort and the train of pack-horses which carried the baggage.

Several times the great carriage broke down in specially bad parts of the road, and the party was surrounded by groups of strange nomads, the moving population of England,—charlatans and cheap-jacks, minstrels and jugglers, men and women who danced on their hands to the music of the *vielle*, begging friars and pilgrims, stopping to stare and gossip on their way. Sometimes a performing bear gave Dick half an hour's delight. Sometimes, if they were delayed by a brook that had overflowed, or by some unusually steep and stony hill, more evil faces of vaga-

bonds, outlaws, bandits, poachers, would peer darkly from the nearest wood, and only the little troop of men-at-arms who rode round my Lady and her household following saved her from being attacked and robbed.

There were also the Fellowships to be feared, for the gentlemen of England were a law to themselves in these days, and many, like Jasper Tilney of King's Hall, joined themselves and their men to a few like-minded friends and set out to pick quarrels with travellers on the highway, generally ending in robbery, if not murder. A galloping troop of such as these more than once crossed the roads followed by Lady Marlowe's party; but her armed escort was too strong, even for these foolhardy gentlemen.

At a point about half-way in the route two miserable men, unarmed except with hedge-stakes, ragged, starving, and bleeding from undressed wounds, crawled out of a ditch with howls of joy at sight of the Marlowe colours. They were two of the small band that Lord Marlowe had taken with him when he rode to Ruddiford and the north. Under my Lady's stern demand,—why and where had they left his lordship?—they told the same story as Antonio; how Lord Marlowe had left Ruddiford alone on Christmas morning, sending word to his men to follow him,—how they had followed and followed over the bleak moors, missing the road, plunging into snow-drifts, blinded by storms, till, never overtaking their master, they turned back seeking him towards Ruddiford, and were fallen on by a troop of masked bandits in a narrow place and cut to pieces, most of them killed in defending the treasure they carried, their horses taken, four or five carried off prisoners, three left wounded by the roadside, of whom these two had crawled so far on the way back to Swanlea, the other having died in a ditch.

Antonio listened to the story with an immovable face—how did it concern him?—and answered innocently my Lady's question what bold villains in the Ruddiford

country could have done this? He might very shrewdly guess: no new proof of Jasper Tilney's desperate way of living astonished him; but he saw no use in naming that fearless young marauder to my Lady, especially as the fate of Lord Marlowe himself occupied her mind far more than that of his slaughtered men.

"We must have the country scoured for him," she said, and her dark eyes gleamed with the mysterious, uneasy look that Antonio did not yet quite understand. "Some evil has happened; he could not go far on foot and alone."

Did she care for Lord Marlowe's safety, or was it her first wish to know that he was out of her way? The Italian was not sure. He would have guessed the second for truth, and now the first possibility startled him. It behoved a man to walk carefully in the sight of those dark eyes. Caresses and flattery and the gift of jewels might mean but a passing fancy, the underside of a character which would crush a plaything on the instant, if any greater interest demanded it.

"Hurry on to the utmost," Lady Marlowe commanded, and her cavalcade, the two wretched fugitives mounted on pack-horses, creaked and struggled forward along the miry lanes.

At last they were within half a dozen miles of the end of the journey, and Antonio, by her ladyship's orders, galloped on to warn Sir William of their arrival. With him were Black Andrew and the two other men who had escorted him to Swanlea, and who loved him none the better for the favour he had met with there, and the delay which seemed its consequence.

The February afternoon was mild and clear, but it was not far from sunset, and the carriage and litters and train of baggage, travelling slowly, would hardly reach Ruddiford till twilight was falling. The sight of horsemen in the distance, flashing out of the woods, across the flat meadows, disappearing again among

the undergrowth, behind the great yews and thorns and hollies that were the advance-guard of the forest, suggested very plainly that this was a country not too safe to ride in, either by night or day. The tired horses were pressed on, but the main body crawled at a long distance behind Antonio and his men. He, too, saw those flitting figures in the distance, and rode the faster, though for himself he did not fear them.

The road, running for some way by the river, was commanded by the hill on which King's Hall and the old church stood, the fir-trees round the churchyard serving for a landmark to the flat country. Here the road turned from the river, which circled the hill on one side, and climbing with a gradual twist, reached the desolate flat ground where Harry Marlowe had been unbound from the horse and dragged by Jasper Tilney to King's Hall. From here the house and church were not visible, hidden by the lie of the ground and a few clumps of trees; but lower down the hill the high gables of the old house rose very stately and, looking over the long roof of the church, kept a fierce watch down the southern valley and over the winding course of the river that crept below.

Down the hill from King's Hall, helter-skelter, stones flying, came Jasper Tilney on Brown Bob and met Antonio face to face. The men, riding forward, drew bridle a little farther on.

"'Tis thou, Tony," Jasper cried; "I knew thy black face and slovenly seat a mile off. No hurry, I have but to whistle, you know, and that fine carriage will be rolled into the ditch. Tell the truth,—is my Lady Marlowe in it?"

Antonio's white teeth showed for an instant between his scarlet lips. "What's that to you, Master Tilney?" he answered. "Do you want to shut up the hen as well as the chick?"

"Is the hen searching for the chick?" retorted Jasper, with something between a growl and a laugh.

"What brings her into these parts? We don't want her,—a Yorkist and a wicked witch, they say."

"Sir William has appointed her Mistress Margaret's guardian, and on that business she comes. She is no Yorkist and no witch, but a noble lady, with whom you must not interfere."

"Do I take orders from you, foreigner?" said Jasper, staring at him fiercely, and fingering the whistle at his neck. "Hark, have you betrayed me to this woman, or does she believe her precious stepson has gone north? Be careful, Tony; you will not deceive me; so long as Alice is at Ruddiford I can trust her to be on my side."

"'Tis well if you can trust any one," Antonio said, with a shrug. "Ride on with me, or the carriage will overtake us. Think how could I betray you, without betraying myself? My Lady believed that my Lord had travelled north to join the Queen, leaving his marriage half made, like the madman they call him. She might never have been wiser, had not you pounced down on his men wandering in the snow on the moors. Why did you not leave them to perish naturally, or what mattered it if they came back to Ruddiford, a drove of asses as they were, having missed their master? You must needs ride after them, catch them, rob them, kill them, capture them, leaving two alive and free to start for home and meet their mistress. They are riding with her now. So get you back to King's Hall for a foolish gentleman, before they ride up and know you again. That might well start suspicion. My Lady is a clever woman, and has a strong escort. Also, you will do well not to put yourself deeper in the wrong with Sir William."

Jasper swore violently. "Ay," he said, "I have four of those fellows in my prison. But on my life, Tony, 'twas not my doing, and I was angry at it. Leonard and a few more of them went after the Marlowe men when I was busy with his lordship. He had

talked of money, and they liked the notion, being all of us as poor as rats in an empty barn. They didn't get much, when it came to be shared. You are right for once ; 'twas foolish, and I told them so. I nearly broke off the Fellowship and swore to live like a pious hermit ; but then they said if they stood by me I must stand by them, and with Marlowe on my hands I could scarce do without them."

"Ah ! How long do you mean to keep him ? "

"Till he swears to give up that marriage. Then I'll send him off on my best horse to join the Queen."

"And will he keep such an oath ? Will he not ride straight to Ruddiford, or Swanlea, or wherever Mistress Margaret may be ? "

Jasper laughed contemptuously. "You low-born son of a black foreign beggar," he said, "what do you know of gentlemen ? "

It might have been the red sunset that made Antonio's face glow and his eyes burn. "As you will, Master Tilney," he murmured. "Men or women, high-born or low, methinks love levels them."

They were now at the top of the hill. Jasper suddenly turned his horse, and without a word of farewell plunged off across the fields towards King's Hall. The foremost of my Lady's cavalcade, just beginning wearily to climb, saw a black horseman against the evening sky, galloping hard away from them.

Antonio too put spurs to his horse, and dashed on to overtake his companions, smiling a little to himself as he rode. Jasper Tilney was not aware of his new rival, or of Lady Marlowe's firm intention to marry Margaret to her own young son. If he had known, it was likely enough that neither Richard nor his mother would have reached the journey's end in safety. True, Antonio himself, looking into the future, had no intention of advancing that marriage ; but a certain hard daring in his nature inclined him to let events roll on as they pleased, confident in his own power to stop or turn them. Even the strange

new experience of my Lady's favour, carrying with it a kind of fascination he had never yet known, did not touch any depths in him. Life lay beyond all that, with prizes such as Isabel Marlowe had not to give. It was only for the present that he was her slave ; and the woman herself, attracted by his beauty and foreign charm, neither knew, nor would have cared had she known, the real strength and remoteness of the cat-like, gentle creature that it pleased her to caress. For the present, however, Antonio was at my Lady's feet ; the new mistress had taken the place of the old master, though no one intended Sir William Roden to find out that.

In the highest gable of King's Hall there was a narrow window, unglazed and barred. It gave little light to the long garret room, low, with heavy rafters almost touching a man's head, where Lord Marlowe had for some six weeks been imprisoned. He had air enough ; the bitter frosty wind of the Midlands blew down the river, and howled in the chimneys of King's Hall, and played what pranks it liked with that topmost storey. When the weather became damp and soft with February, rills of water ran down the black walls. Now and then the sun shone warmly in, and then the prisoner spent much of his time clinging to the bars of the window, enjoying the warmth and looking down on the distant flats and the road that crossed them, the road along which he had ridden so prosperously on Christmas Eve in the snow.

Much Harry wondered, as he stared at the dismal prospect, what had happened at Ruddiford after his disappearance. What did Sir William think of it ? What were his own men doing ? What could the Queen think, as the weeks went by, and her faithful servant did not rejoin her ? He had heard nothing of Wakefield, and supposed her to be still collecting forces in the north. He had felled timber and sold cattle and done all he could to raise a sum to help the cause he believed in. Those money-bags of his, were

they still lying in the west tower of Ruddiford Castle ? No one had told him that they, with four of the good fellows who guarded them, were under the same roof with himself. He might have been wiser if his window had overlooked the north instead of the south road, for then by straining he could have seen the court and gateway of the house. As it was, his first view was of the rugged tiles of the church roof, long and low, and then, past the fir-trees, of the lonely track winding away into white or brown, but always foggy distance.

There was nothing to be learnt from an old bent man, who night and morning brought him more food than he cared to eat, but who seemed deaf to any questions he might ask. Jasper Tilney's almost daily visits were not more satisfactory. His manner was fierce and forbidding. He would stride in suddenly, banging the heavy door ; he would cast his wild blue eyes round the room ; and strangely enough, some slight extra comfort was often the result of these careless glances. But certainly in look or bearing there was no kindness, scarcely any courtesy. Something furtive in the glance that flashed over Harry suggested to him that the man was ashamed of what he had done, but in words Jasper gave no sign of this. He saw the fine features sharpening, the colour of the face changing from healthy brown to sickly yellow, while purple circles widened round the clear eyes, the hands growing thin and white, the dark hair matted and long. His question was always the same. Holding up the cross handle of his dagger, he would say, "Have you changed your mind, my Lord ?" ; and when Harry replied, "Nay, Sir, it knows not change," he would leave him, generally without a word more, sometimes frowning sulkily, sometimes with an angry laugh as he slid the great bolts again.

And so at last came that February day when Harry, pale and dishevelled at his high window, saw a distant train passing in the evening light, disappearing behind the thorns and hollies that grew along the ditches

by the road, coming forth again into the reach of his eagerly watching eyes. They had the keenness of the old world, and Harry forgot all bodily discomfort in the gaze ; for he saw his own colours, his own men, the gorgeous length of his step-mother's clumsy carriage, and young Dick, gay as ever, caracoling on horseback near by. Antonio, whom he had never noticed, was beyond his recognition ; but he saw the three men in Roden livery who followed that dark figure at a gallop in advance of the party, disappearing from his sight as they breasted the hill ; and he saw the two fugitives from his own band, hanging like broken men on the broad backs of the pack-horses, and wondered what my Lady was doing with two poor sick fellows in her train.

He tore off the white silk shirt he was wearing, and waved it wildly from the bars ; but it seemed to him that no one looked up, and in a few minutes the whole cavalcade passed out of sight behind the parapet of the church and was hidden by the projection of the hill.

Then Harry Marlowe's constant patience deserted him. He saw it all, and the view was not reassuring. Sir William Roden, bewildered by his disappearance—and what wonder ?—had sent an express messenger to Lady Marlowe. She was angry,—there was little doubt of that ; his strange action in substituting himself for Dick would seem to her unaccountable, the burning of her letters an act of treason. These indeed were matters which no one but himself could atone for or explain. Even Harry, accustomed to take his own way like a prince, without consulting any man, knew that by his own code he had gone far. And after six weeks' absence, six weeks of voluntary prison for the sake of Meg's sweet eyes, her entrancing charm seemed no longer an entire justification. Love and Beauty ! they think they rule the world, but on its battlefield they may meet stronger powers, such as Honour and Duty.

These cold reflections troubled Harry's soul not a little. As the twilight fell, after tramping up and down his garret like the madman they called him, he flung himself down and buried his face in his arms on the rough oak table. One question now—would Meg be true to him? For his seeming desertion would justify Sir William in any anger against him, and certainly in consenting to her marriage with young Dick. And few but Harry himself could baulk my Lady in any plan she had set her heart upon. He might have cursed the day he came to Ruddiford, throwing himself, as it proved, into the clutches of a young ruffian from whom he saw no means of escape, if it had not been for the thought of Meg. Sweet Meg,—her lips on his, her soft hair against his cheek, all her young slender beauty resting in his arms, the fire of those lovely eyes of hers, which spoke so much that she knew not how to say,—the minutes with her were worth a man's while, even if paid for by months of idleness and suffering.

After all, this present state of things could not last for ever. It was past reason to imagine that. Many must know that he was here, in the hands of young Tilney and his Fellowship. The struggle in the street must have been seen. That Sir William Roden and Mistress Margaret knew where he was, he did not believe for a moment; but now, surely, the news would drift by some means to my Lady, and she would undoubtedly see him set free, the head of the house, even if he had offended her.

Harry's mind was not one to which mistrust came naturally. It was part of his pride to put a careless confidence in all with whom he had to do. And yet a strange uneasiness was eating at his heart as he sat there, telling himself, that if only Meg were true to him,—and force alone, he swore, could separate their lives from each other—then there was nothing to be feared from earth or heaven.

The bolts were drawn with a sudden grinding, the

great rusty key screeched in the lock, the enormous hinges groaned. Jasper Tilney stalked into the room, and Harry lifted his head, with a grave and haughty look meeting the bold stare of his jailer. Jasper came up to the table, leaned on it with both hands, and for a moment their eyes met like clashing swords, without speech. Even then Harry Marlowe was detached enough from his own misery, to admire the young fellow's splendid bearing.

"Young—and in love with Meg! I might have done the same myself"—the thought crossed his brain.

"Ask what you will," said Jasper; then, seeing his prisoner smile, he coloured angrily.

"I am not used to asking," Harry said. "I will tell you something, and I will advise. Will you listen?"

Jasper nodded, then tossed back the red locks that tumbled over his brow.

"The Lady Marlowe, my mother, with a troop of my people, passed along the road there half an hour since. I signalled from the window. Could I have wrenched your bars aside, I might have leaped to the church roof, and so climbed down and followed her."

"And broken your lordship's bones. Though I hate you, I should be sorry," said Jasper, and smiled, but not sweetly. "Your signal,—did they answer it?"

"I saw no reply," Harry said; "but I warn you, Master Tilney, it will by some means be discovered where I am. My own men are doubtless still at Ruddiford, waiting in confusion of mind my Lady's orders. There will be a search, and bold as you and your Fellowship may be, King's Hall will not escape. The Queen, too,—remember that she waits in the north for the little help I may bring, and you are at least supposed to be for Lancaster. You laugh, Sir?"

"I laugh at your ignorance, my Lord, at your rashness too, for what is to hinder me from changing your

lodgings? I have dungeons under the river, as well as cells in the clouds, and if you divert yourself with signalling from your nest here, why,—or there is a shorter way, my Lord, if we find ourselves in danger through keeping you. But as to your ignorance, do not believe Queen Margaret is waiting for you. Much has happened since Christmas morning. Without your help, they have fixed Duke Richard's head over the gate of York town. The snow and the rain and the wind have made a black object of it by this time."

Lord Marlowe sprang to his feet, his own affairs forgotten. "The Duke of York dead?"

"Ay, and the Queen is marching on London."

"And I not there! By Heaven, sir, you should have told me this before,"—and without noticing Jasper's mocking laugh, he hurried out a dozen eager questions.

For a few minutes these two men of the Red Rose, the half-hearted and the true, talked of Wakefield, of Mortimer's Cross, of the nobles on either side, of Queen Margaret's dashing march and its chances. At last Harry stopped, drew a long breath, walked up to Jasper Tilney and seized him by the arm. As the young fellow, starting violently, tried to shake him off and snatched at his own sword, Harry's grip tightened and he cried impatiently: "Shame, sir, shame! You a servant of King Henry, and draw on an unarmed man, your prisoner? Nay, come, you cannot keep me here. Give me arms and a horse, and let me ride after the Queen. Send word to my men to join me, and——"

Jasper stared at him under level brows, fiercely. "Remember, my Lord, you are your own prisoner, not mine. Promise you know what, and you are free."

With these words he seemed to hurl Harry Marlowe back into the slough from which the news of the Queen had lifted him. Renounce Meg! That was the condition of being free to ride abroad and fight loyally. Then it seemed he must rot in prison. He measured

Jasper with his eye, then flung himself back into the chair from which he had risen.

"I have no new answer for that," he said. "But—" he thought deeply for a minute or two, while Jasper watched him. "But as you have the best of me, I will offer you this. No such promise can I make and live; but set me free from this hole of yours, let me ride to Ruddiford, speak on urgent affairs with my mother, take my men and follow the Queen. Hark to me, Master Tilney! In return for this courtesy of yours, I will not seek to have you punished, and furthermore, I will take my oath not to speak with Mistress Roden till my return from the wars." He lowered his voice, speaking reverently, as of some saint. "In her grandfather's charge," he said, "or in that of my mother, she will remain. If you choose to put yourself forward again among her suitors, you are free to do so. You will be answered as she and her guardians may will it. And my mother shall hear from me that I have made you this promise."

While he spoke, Jasper never removed his blue angry eyes from his face. That a prisoner, with every mark of suffering and hardship upon him, could look so majestically and speak so proudly, was not without its effect on a nature which had its better side. But even with the recognition of Lord Marlowe's great nobleness flamed up a fury of envious rage, and when Harry paused, the young man burst into scornful laughter.

"Fore God, my Lord Marlowe, your insolence is beyond limit," he said. "You talk of saving me from punishment! Who will punish me, think you, or my bold Fellowship? And you suppose we have done nothing more than shut up your lordship for six weeks in a garret, while your men sit round the fire at Ruddiford and spend your money in the alehouses? Ask the crows on the north moors what we have done with your men, and our sweethearts how we have scattered your money. And by all the powers of heaven and

hell, shall I thank you humbly for leave to woo my wife? No! die where you are, and we'll throw your carcase into the Ruddy, and Mistress Meg shall see it from the window whence she saw you first, floating down stream."

So saying, young Tilney flung himself out of the room. The door clanged, the bolts screeched into their places, and Lord Marlowe was left alone with his thoughts, while the darkness of night descended.

Chapter VIII

THE FANCY OF THE POPINJAY

SIR WILLIAM RODEN received Lady Marlowe with much ceremony and distinction. Antonio, her forerunner, did not find the castle unprepared. Dame Kate, who acted as housekeeper and by right of age and experience ruled over the maids, had unlocked cupboards where household treasures had been packed away since the death of John Roden and his young wife. During the short time they lived at Ruddiford, a kind of luxury had reigned which was quite foreign to Sir William's more simple and old-world nature,—embroidered hangings, silken cushions stuffed with lavender, silver plate, vessels of glass powdered or spotted with gold; and for my Lady's chamber silk curtains and counterpanes, feather-beds, down pillows, blankets in plenty and sheets of fine linen. Casks of foreign wine were broached; strong ale flowed like water for all who came; the larder was stocked with meat and poultry from the farms and fish from the Ruddy. The servants, lazy with long idleness, ran hither and thither; any one who shirked work now might fear a clout over the head from Dame Kate's distaff, or a shoe thrown after him to hurry him on his way.

And so this second company with the Marlowe colours came winding over the bridge that February evening, but no fair girl's figure leaned from the castle window to watch and welcome the entry of Isabel and her son. A great shyness and dread had seized on Margaret, and she kept herself, so long as possible, shut up in her own rooms. There was no doubt in her

mind that Harry must, by letter or message, wherever he might be, have explained matters to his step-mother ; of that there could be no doubt at all, with one terrible condition, if he still lived. For she could not resist the suspicion of foul play which had preyed upon her since his sudden and strange disappearance. That he had changed his mind and forgotten her was impossible. When little Simon Toste, who visited her by Sir William's orders and prescribed drugs and potions, himself without an ounce of faith in them, dared to hint at this explanation, Meg fell upon him and hustled him out of the room, calling him in plain words liar and slanderer. He went away discomfited, but came back the next morning, for he loved the girl, and three honest hearts, his own, his brother Timothy's, and Sir Thomas the Vicar's, were well-nigh broken by the sight of her misery.

Yes, Meg told herself, my Lady knew all, as well from Harry as from her grandfather's letters. She would not therefore dream of pursuing the old plans, of setting forward the marriage with her own son. Foolish gossips might talk, but surely my Lady was noble and kind, else how would Harry's father have married her ? So Meg sternly assured herself ; yet the misgivings that troubled her were at their height when a blast of trumpets announced my Lady's arrival. Oh, if she and her son would but have stayed away in the south, and left a poor maid to bear life as she could till Lord Marlowe's return !

The first sight of the dreaded guests was not alarming. Sir William, for his part, was enchanted with my Lady. Splendidly handsome and dignified in her black velvet robes, her grave stateliness was now and then relieved by the bright flash of a smile. Richard, in gay colours, the picture of youth and gaiety, was a delightful object at which all the castle people stared open-mouthed. The very sight of him was a relief to Meg. He kissed her hand and looked up in her face with a laugh, as much as to say, " Fear nothing

from me, sweet sister." My Lady received Meg's reverence without much expression of any kind, looking upon her gravely, and with the slightest lifting of the brows. "Is this the face that drove away poor Harry's few wits?" might have been the thought in her ladyship's mind; and indeed Meg's young loveliness had suffered from the mental agony of those six weeks.

The talk at supper was entirely between Sir William Roden and Lady Marlowe, the rest of the company keeping silence, except with their eyes. Antonio's never left Margaret, except for an occasional glance at Isabel, who never once looked towards him. Dick's roving glances found a pleasant object in the sunny looks and fair curls of Alice Tilney, who was not afraid to pay him back in the same coin. Meg's lowered eyelids were lifted for no man.

After supper Antonio helped his old master back to his own room, and with low bows left him and Lady Marlowe together, their chairs on either side of the great chimney.

"Be not far off, Tony, in case I want thee—but no eavesdropping, rascal," said Sir William.

Antonio laughed and went, not so quickly but that he heard the old man say to my Lady: "A clever dog, that, a legacy from my son John, who brought him, a little lad, from Italy. Picked him up in the street, a beggar foundling. He is of vast use to me. I hope he hath in no way displeased your ladyship."

"Far from it, Sir William," was the grave reply. "I have found him very capable and well-mannered."

Antonio ran down the stairs smiling, but for all that his teeth were set on edge. There was now a burst of talk below in the hall, where some of the men-at-arms had trooped in and were tossing off ale in silver goblets. The women were gone. Young Dick Marlowe stood whistling, looking on at the scene.

"Here, Italian," he said, as he would have called a dog. "Who was that pretty lady on Mistress

Roden's left hand? Not a waiting-maid, sure? She looked well born. Come, you know,—white neck and pink cheeks of Nature's painting—no plastering there. Blue eyes that can laugh back at a man and understand without the need of words—eh? Who is she?"

"That lady, sir," Antonio answered, "is Mistress Alice Tilney, Mistress Roden's companion and friend."

"Ha! On my life, she's the prettiest maid of the two. Well born, then?"

"There is no older name in the Midlands than Tilney of King's Hall."

"I thought as much."

Dick turned abruptly away, and Antonio, after a moment's hesitation, slipped up the stairs again and turned along a gallery which led to one of the lower towers, and through this, by two doors and a passage in the thickness of the wall, out into a garden on the southern ramparts of the castle. On this garden, bright in summer with red roses, when the view of the river and meadow and distant forest was green and gay, the windows of Mistress Margaret's own rooms looked down; but they did not overlook it all, one part being screened from sight by the jutting buttresses of the tower.

Here, on this first night of his return, Antonio had a tryst with Alice Tilney; and though the evening was dark and chilly and full of creeping mist from the water, he knew she would keep it faithfully.

She was there indeed before him, and this time she had no reason to complain of his coldness; the sudden flame of passionate excitement with which he seized and kissed her was something new.

"Ah, Tonio, but I thought you were never coming back!" sighed the girl. "What kept you so long away?"

"I had to wait as long as it pleased her ladyship. Do you know, my Alice,—" he drew her down, holding her fast, on a stone seat under the great walls,—“do

you know that you are the loveliest woman here,—lovelier than Meg herself ? ”

“ Do you know, Signor, that you are the greatest flatterer ? ”

Antonio laughed. “ It was not I that said it. Though I love you well, little Alice, I do not care to tell you lies.”

The girl, at first blushing with pleasure, began to pout and to push him away. “ Who said it then ? ”

“ Master Richard Marlowe, the Popinjay. I thought him a fool for his pains ; but 'tis his way to blurt out anything he should keep to himself.”

Alice's ready smile had returned ; she was not displeased by Dick's admiration. “ Well,” she said, “ if I am the prettiest woman—'tis not true, I know, but you should not be the one to tell me so—ah, gently, rude wretch ! ” as her lover's caresses became a little too eager. “ Let me speak. If I am the prettiest woman, Master Marlowe is the handsomest man. I never liked a fair man before, but his figure, his dress, his smile, those talking eyes of his—ah, Antonio ! ”

“ Enough of his praises. Let me hear more, and I'll kiss you to death, and stick my dagger into him.”

“ No, no, you must keep him alive for Meg, if she is to have him. If only it were I—I should easily choose between him and that crazy lord with his long brown visage ! But, Tonio, she is breaking her heart for him. Sometimes I can hardly refrain from telling her——”

“ Peace !—that you dare not do.”

“ No ; I should be slain twice over. But is that what my Lady means to do with Meg, to marry her to this worshipful Popinjay ? What will my poor Jasper do ? ”

“ Ay, and it is what she meant all along. Listen, and I'll tell you. It was as I guessed ; my Lord had a fancy to take the prize for himself, instead of giving it to his brother. But now it seems Master Dick will win the race after all,—at least, my Lady means it ;

and mind you, Alice, my Lady is a greater queen than every Queen Margaret was or will be."

"Her face frightens me," the girl said. "But go on, Tonio; tell me about Swanlea and all you did there."

He laughed queerly. "Another time, child; now listen and obey me. If it pleases Dick Marlowe to praise your sweet face, or even to make love to you, do not answer roughly. Draw him on, play with him, use all your pretty tricks; I give you full leave and licence. Well, why do you not answer? 'Tis no unkindness to Meg, and I will take care of myself, I promise you."

His instinct, even in the dark, told him that Alice was both puzzled and offended. She was by nature an honest girl, and if, for her misfortune, she had found him irresistible, it was not her way to waste favours on every man who admired her. Her brother's Fellowship knew that.

"I do not understand you," she said slowly. "At least, if I do," for he laughed, "I must have some reason for it. Why do you wish me to play with this boy's fancy, you, who say you love me? Are these the ways you have picked up among the great, for they are not those of Ruddiford or King's Hall. One love is enough for us here, Tonio."

"Foolish girl," he said, more kindly. "Well, 'tis true, I ask you to behave as any great lady might, to further her own or her family's ends. You will not harm yourself; are you afraid of harming the innocent boy, Dick Marlowe?"

Again Alice paused a moment before she answered: "He has a sweet countenance, and for worlds I would not hurt him. Make me understand you, Tonio; what ends of yours shall I further by doing this?"

Antonio was angry, for the question was not easy to answer, and it was the first time that Alice, his willing slave, had not accepted his commands without question. But his clever brain did not fail him.

" 'Tis not for my sake," he said, " but for Jasper's. Maybe you do not know of his last exploit ? "

" Few things that Jasper does are hidden from me," Alice said and sighed. " How can I serve him by any commerce with a Marlowe ? He would be ready to kill both you and me if he knew all that we know. And if this young man offered me his love, without any talk of marriage, which would be impossible,——"

" I do not know why," Antonio muttered, so low that she hardly caught the words. " Sweetheart," he said aloud, " you take all this too seriously. At least, you can see that any passing fancy which draws away a hopeful suitor of Mistress Meg's must advantage Jasper. But truly 'twas not that I meant, for Jasper has offended Sir William, and Meg herself likes him not. I meant that a friend among the Marlowes would be useful to him, when he comes to give an account of their chief he has imprisoned, their men he has hunted and slain, their money and goods he has taken. What of Lord Marlowe's troop, Alice ? Two of them, starving and wounded, joined us on our journey here."

" It was not Jasper's doing," the girl cried. " It was that wicked Leonard, who is his evil angel. And as to the taking my Lord himself—is it *you*, *you*, who dare blame Jasper for that ? "

Antonio laughed. " Jasper is a fool, with his blundering Fellowship. He will make the country too hot to hold him. My Lady Marlowe is not a woman to be played with, and so we shall one and all find. Take my counsel, make a friend of Dick the Popinjay. And now, time's flying,—kiss me, pretty sweet, and tell me how the days dragged with you while I was away. Tell me of poor Meg, too. By St. Antony and his devils, do you know that she has spoilt her beauty with pining for Mad Marlowe ? "

While her ladyship's new favourite was thus amusing himself and entertaining Alice Tilney, she and Sir William Roden were talking by the fireside, with

perfect openness on one side and the appearance of it on the other. Isabel had a talent for suiting her talk and manners to her company. It seemed to Sir William that she was the very woman he had pictured to himself his old friend's wife must be, and he thought more scorn than ever of the warnings the Ruddiford busybodies had given him, and plumed himself on his wisdom and penetration in trusting to my Lady.

They talked politics a little, not going far, but far enough to settle Sir William's mind on that score. He was sure,—more from what she did not say than from what she said—that to call my Lady a Yorkist was to insult her. It appeared to him that she respected the traditions of her family, and this was enough for him. He told his story of Agincourt, and she smiled and asked questions about King Harry the Fifth and her husband in his young days. She knew Sir William's family history; she admired Ruddiford Castle, she praised the fine order of his house, the richness of his appointments. To herself she had wondered how it would be possible to pass even a few days in this savage hole far from modern civilisation, where the Middle Ages still reigned in all their barbarism; but she saw that the place was strong and could well be held for Edward, and she was sincere in thinking that her young Richard would find here no mean heritage.

Thus passed the first quarter of an hour of that interview. Sir William was at his best, happy and mild; his thin old hand stroked his white beard peacefully; his blue eyes, calm, confident, friendly, reposed on the still beautiful woman who sat upright in the chair opposite to him, her clear-cut face young and distinguished in the flattering light of the fire. Sir William himself had half forgotten, as he rambled on of old times and of his various possessions, the serious business that had brought my Lady to Ruddiford. She found it necessary, at last, to begin herself

the subject of Lord Marlowe's strange conduct and disappearance.

"The old man is in his dotage," she said to herself. "Like his kind, he can only remember far-away things—Agincourt and such—battles fought before the world began. Antonio told me less than the truth of the old fool and his folly." Aloud, she made formal apology to Sir William for what Lord Marlowe had done, and explained to him her real wishes, and her amazement at finding in how strange a manner the embassy had failed.

"Ah, your ladyship's ambassador lost his head," the old man said, smiling. "Your son Richard,—a handsome lad he is, truly—should have come himself to woo my Margaret. She is young, but Lord Marlowe was not the first man to be conquered by her lovely face. There's Jasper Tilney, a wild fellow whose estate borders mine, but I sent him packing, and the faster that Meg did not like him; she hath her fancies, this grandchild of mine."

"In my view," said Lady Marlowe a little drily, "young men and maidens should have no say of their own in matters of marriage. These things must be arranged by the family, for the advantage of all."

"Surely, surely,—your ladyship is right—my Meg is a spoilt wench, poor little maid. 'Twas altogether a misfortunate thing, that affair of Lord Marlowe. She set her obstinate heart upon him. I would, my Lady, you had seen it all. There sat my Lord—here stood Meg by my chair—"

Isabel waved her hand, smiling, but a little impatiently. "Sir William," she said, "the excellent Antonio, your secretary, did his best to set the thing before me."

"Ah, did he indeed? And he told you how at last it was his own doing,—how my Lord, as Tony guessed, was torn between a sudden love for Meg and loyalty to his mission, and how Tony put the

words into his mouth, as he was asking her hand for his brother, *Yourself, my Lord.*"

A curious look came into the Baroness' face; it was half a smile, curling the lips away from the teeth, but the eyes narrowed unpleasantly. "He did not tell me," she murmured. "Master Antonio did that, and why?"

"Out of pure mischief," the Knight said, nodding wisely. "A small frolic with a great result, which vexed Tony as much as any of us. But after all, to my thinking, the thing was done without any word from Tony. 'Twas love, my Lady, sudden and desperate. I was wroth with my poor Meg, and spoke sharply to her, but when I found that her fine lover had changed his mind as quickly as he made it, and gone north without a word, I was sorry for the maid and scolded her no more. For it seemed to me that, saving your presence, certain gossips were right who had whispered to me—but your ladyship is distracted?"

For Isabel was staring at the fire, and instead of listening to his talk, was muttering to herself with the same unpleasant smile. "So,—'twas part of the truth after all,—and the question might have served,—not too late to punish by and by,—a dangerous path to cross is mine, pretty boy!"

Sir William's last words recalled her instantly, and with frank face and clear eyes she turned to him. "All this is past," she said. "Two things I have to say to you. First—it was your wish,—I understood that you had written it in your will—that I should have charge of Margaret, educate her suitably in my own house, protect her from unfitting suitors, marry her well. Your own life being uncertain,—though I trust you may see a venerable age—you wished to have a mind at ease as to your granddaughter. I am right, Sir William?"

"All that was indeed my wish," the old man said.

"Then I pray you to understand that this foolish

business shall be to us,—to you and me—as if it had never been. I will accept the charge of Margaret, and I will marry her, as soon as may be, to the husband I chose for her on receiving your first letter, my son Richard Marlowe. As to my stepson, no woman has yet come between him and his Queen. He is a strange man, full of quips and turns of fancy, no mate for a fair young girl, such as your Margaret.”

“So indeed I think,” Sir William said. “But Margaret, my Lady——”

“Leave her to me.” Isabel smiled her brightest.

“You will not carry her away now? Nay, nay, I cannot——”

“A moment’s patience,” she said. “I had a second thing to say. I am plagued with a doubt whether Lord Marlowe ever reached the Queen. Not a word have I had from him since he left Swanlea. I find that his men, having left Ruddiford by his orders to follow him north, never found him, but wandered on the moors, were attacked by outlaws,—as I suppose—robbed, killed, scattered. Two of them, by happy chance, met me on my way. Now, Sir William, by your leave, I will stay a while at Ruddiford. We will marry Richard and Margaret, and we will search every hole and corner in this wild country of yours to find my Lord Marlowe. For, though I may be displeased with him, I cannot allow my husband’s son, the head of our house, to disappear like an unknown man.”

“Surely not,” Sir William cried, his pale old cheeks turning red. “This that you tell me is strange, and very terrible. Why, Meg feared as much. Who can have done this? There are wild fellows abroad. But no—he is bad enough, but he would not dare—where are these two men?” He started from his chair and shouted—“Tony, Tony, rascal, where art thou?” while her ladyship sat still and smiled.

Chapter IX

“ I AM YOUR TRUE AND LOVING DAUGHTER ”

IT appeared that the finding of Harry, or at least the gaining some news of him, filled Lady Marlowe's thoughts much more than the immediate marriage of her own son. Her eagerness and anxiety mystified Antonio not a little, for he found it hard to give her ladyship credit for loving the eccentric and troublesome stepson. Yet, if she cared not at all what became of him, why should she have turned Ruddiford upside down in the attempt to trace his path on that fateful Christmas Day ?

Sir William Roden, at least, found her behaviour all that he would have expected from the loyal wife of an elder Harry Marlowe. He was at her service in every way. Parties of his own men and hers were sent out to patrol the north road for many miles. All that they found was the place where the bodies of Lord Marlowe's slain men had been buried by the country people. They searched the scattered farms, the wretched hovels by the way-side ; they questioned the villagers with threats of punishment, here and there beating men till they remembered seeing a solitary traveller on foot struggling across the moor in the snow. To the question “ Whither went he ? ” they pointed vaguely northward, ever northward, and it was a fair chance that the impatient men-at-arms, after a weary ride that way, would come storming back over the fells and for all reward beat the poor hinds again. After that their memories failed them, and inquiries were met with obstinate silence

and ignorance, more honest than the men were ready to believe. They searched the open moor, now purple and brown, boggy and wet with all the life of coming spring. Several of them were nearly lost in these bogs, which had swallowed men and horses before now. After searching the caves and rocky shelters, the scattered fir-groves, the acres of heather and gorse and ling, they returned at last to the Castle, saying that without a doubt, unless he had gone away so fast as to outstrip his men entirely, which seemed impossible, some of those deep bogs held Lord Marlowe in their black depths, where only the Judgment Day would find him.

His own two men, who joined in the search, thought rather that he had been overtaken and killed by the same band of outlaws who had attacked them. They themselves followed the road in fear and trembling, expecting to meet those old enemies again, whose very existence was a mystery. Jasper Tilney's Fellowship kept their secrets well; the fray had been seen by no man; and there seemed no exact evidence to connect them with this last crime, committed while Ruddiford sat still on Christmas Day, lazily carousing. If Sir William and his people had any suspicion of them, nothing confirmed it; in all the castle only Alice and Antonio knew. Some of the Ruddiford men, despising these fellows from the south, said among themselves that there existed no large known band of robbers so near the north of the town, and suspected that Lord Marlowe's troop, left without a leader, had quarrelled and fought among themselves for the treasure they were known to be carrying; that the strongest had won, and the two cowards now at Ruddiford had run away. This was strongly the opinion of Black Andrew, Sir William's boldest follower, whose visit to Swanlea had filled him with scorn of the luxury and greediness and unmanly tricks of her ladyship's household. He went so far as to suggest that Lord Marlowe had been overtaken and murdered

by his own men. If Black Andrew had had his way, the two poor wretches who escaped would have cooled their heels in the dungeon by way of refreshing their memories. Luckily for them their mistress did not suspect them. She had them kindly treated and well fed. Perhaps she foresaw a time when an extra couple of strong followers might be useful to her.

During the fruitless search for Harry, the person most interested of all kept herself silent in the background. She heard of all that passed but seemed to notice little. Margaret had grown older by ten years at least in those six weeks of deepening mystery and terror; and this not so much in looks,—for to eyes with understanding there was but a new charm added to the beautiful child’s face—but in mind and in bearing. The girl was very stately, and her native pride had deepened into a cold reserve with every one about her. Sir William felt it least, for she was seldom alone with him now, and Lady Marlowe’s presence distracted and occupied him. As regarded her, there was no fault to be found with Meg; she did all that was necessary, with Alice and her young maids, in the way of dutiful attendance on her ladyship. Sir William’s conscience plagued him a little now and then, and occasionally Meg met a glance that was wistful; but in these days Isabel’s opposite influence was always there, convincing him that her arrangements were the only ones right and necessary.

Meg confided in no one. Old Dame Kate, occupied morning, noon, and night with cares of housekeeping, had now no time to watch her nursling. The bent old body could scarce bear the burden of fatigue; if she sat down, in a moment she was nodding and tumbling off her chair; the lively spirit was blocked by beef and mutton, drowned in canary and strong ale. Lent was coming on, too, and the supply of fish for such a household was a new anxiety to be faced by Dame Kate. As to the imminence of a wedding feast, no one dared to speak plainly of such

a thing in her ears. She would not look forward ; the twelve hours that were passing were quite enough for her.

Some barrier,—Alice knew what it was better than Meg—stood between the companions, the two young girls, once such loving friends together. The chill had begun when Jasper Tilney made his formal offer of marriage, so flatly refused ; and now, for a few months past, certain signs of a secret intimacy between Alice and Secretary Antonio had offended Mistress Margaret, she hardly knew why. Saying nothing, she had withdrawn herself a little more from Alice who, not untrue to her in heart, dared not now venture a word of sympathy.

In Ruddiford generally, among all the better sort of people, Margaret would have found faithful service enough. The Christmas love-adventure, much discussed by the gossips, met with different opinions in the town ; there were those who condemned Lord Marlowe as mad or bad or both, and called Mistress Meg a naughty wench who deserved a whipping ; there were others who delighted in the romance of it, admired the boldness of the knight, the devotion of the lady. Between these parties stood the three worthies who had done their best to check that infatuation by which Sir William had thrown his grandchild and Ruddiford into the hands of the Marlowes.

In these days Sir Thomas Pye the Vicar, and the two Masters Toste, were often to be seen pacing up the street to the north gate of the castle, where no question was ever made about admitting them. He and they had long forgotten Sir William's hasty violence, which had driven them forth in the autumn so opprobriously. They had taken their old respected place again, though experience had made them cautious about giving their true opinion of the whole Marlowe family, especially now that the Baroness and her train might almost be said to hold the castle. They were careful of intruding on her and Sir William,—

the lawyer and the apothecary, at least; for the reverend Vicar, as chaplain, took freely his right of going and coming as he pleased, and young Richard had his fill of laughing at the tall, solemn man who turned a pale visage upon him so threateningly.

The three worthies were never tired of reminding themselves, not to mention the by-standers, that they were the legally appointed executors of Sir William's will, and possibly, probably, the only surviving ones. They made the most, to themselves and others, of the right this office gave them to keep a guardian eye on Mistress Margaret. It was all very well that the personal charge of her, in that same will, had been given to Isabel Lady Marlowe. They had not forgotten that her ladyship was also requested to take counsel with them as to the disposing of Margaret. And for fear that anything should now be done without their knowledge, they haunted the castle persistently. If the old master cared not to receive them, they were sure of a smile when they crossed the threshold of Meg's own rooms. She knew they loved her. She said no more to them than to any other, but she even forgave Simon Toste his hard words of Harry, though not till the little Doctor's heart had been saddened by her marked coldness to him and courteous attention to his brother and the Vicar.

One of Lady Marlowe's fashions, which gave much discontent to the Ruddiford household, was that of walking about unannounced and unattended, so that no one was sure of escaping her observation. At certain times she was ceremonious enough, and any failure of duty in waiting upon her was sure to meet with sharp reproof; but there were hours when she roamed here and there, finding her way through the ancient passages of the castle, climbing the towers, pacing the ramparts, opening doors without warning, her light, swift steps and the rustle of her gown hardly heard before she was there in presence with bright

cold eyes considering any group on which she intruded. And her self-confidence so completely justified her curiosity, that it was not her ladyship's self, but the men and women who suffered under these visits, who seemed out of place.

Thus, one day, she mounted alone to the tower where Margaret's rooms were, lifted the latch and entered the largest room, where Meg and her maidens had their embroidery frames, and were now working a rich altar-cloth for the church at Ruddiford. Flowers in the garden of Paradise, golden angels with peacock wings swinging censers before the throned Lamb with fleece all curls of silver; all this was growing and glowing in the room, into which the low February sun shone through narrow windows softly. Four young girls, Meg's waiting-maids, were working at the frames, and Meg herself was standing in a deep window where the light was strongest, her face gravely bent over two skeins of silk that she was matching together.

This was all very well and as a lady's room should be. But on a high-backed settle between the fireplace and the window, there sat three men in black, a tall man in the middle, a short man on each side of him; the three worthy executors, paying a visit to Mistress Meg and watching the progress of embroidery. Lady Marlowe was not precisely surprised to see them there, for she had heard men's voices before she opened the door.

All in the room stood up and saluted her as she entered, while Meg came forward and gravely handed her to a chair. Her ladyship looked round smiling, but with a somewhat quizzical expression.

"Your suite, pretty mistress?" she said softly and playfully.

Meg flushed a little. The four rustic girls in their white caps and aprons, the three quaint men, one more ugly and glum than another, only the good Vicar with any knowledge of the world, and he looking

on Lady Marlowe as first cousin to the devil,—the situation was curious, to say the least of it.

Meg waved her hand towards the three. “Nay, my friends and guests, Madam,” she said. “At least you know our honoured Vicar, Sir Thomas Pye.”

“Ah, doubtless! You, Sir, with these good men, share with me and, I hope, with my son, Sir William’s most intimate confidence.”

The three faces cleared. At any rate, her ladyship was not insolent; on the contrary, her manner and words were gracious. Then outspoke Sir Thomas, advancing, while his humbler colleagues remained in the shadow of the settle. “I hope, my Lady, that we may all be equally worthy of my good patron’s trust.”

Her ladyship took the aspiration well, “Sir,” she said, “I make no manner of doubt of it.”

For a moment the Vicar considered her doubtfully. Then he turned his eyes on Margaret, who stood by Lady Marlowe very silently with eyes cast down; but he could not read at all what was in her mind. Since she learned that Harry had been lost sight of, and that his mother had never heard, from himself, of the wonderful event of Christmas Eve, Meg had been more silent than ever. It was impossible for any one to touch on that subject with her; no one knew what thoughts, what resolves, might be in her mind now. It seemed as if her grandfather shrank from talking with her, and Lady Marlowe had not yet made for herself an opportunity of speaking face to face with her. Not till now, indeed, had she shown signs of interest in any of Meg’s doings.

The sight of the woman in Meg’s own room was very unwelcome to Sir Thomas Pye. He considered how he could help the dear maiden by making the time pass pleasantly. With a stride towards the table he stooped over the nearest frame, twisted his head on his long thin neck with an attempt at a smile, and pointed with a skinny finger to the nearest angel’s

glowing wings. "Your ladyship should notice this fine piece of work," he said.

Lady Marlowe glanced carelessly that way. "I care not much for needlework," she said coldly. "In times of peace, 'tis fit for fools whose brains lodge in their fingers. In time of war, such as we now have, 'tis to be despised altogether. Women should learn to gird on men's swords, to bind their wounds, to make pillows for their sick heads and herb drinks for fevered throats. Who knows how soon the war may roll this way? there may be fighting in the little streets of Ruddiford; of what use then, Sir Vicar, will be all your silken embroideries?"

The priest drew himself to his full height. The four girls whose labour was thus condemned looked up with disappointed eyes. Margaret found herself suddenly compelled to turn, to look Lady Marlowe in the face. Something in her ringing tones had brought with extraordinary vividness the thought of Harry. Truly, yes, if he lay wounded here, those rich silks and glorious pictures might soon be rolled up for him to lie upon.

"This work that your ladyship despises," said Sir Thomas, "is not for the service of man. It is for the high altar in our old church that Mistress Margaret and her maidens are——"

"Sir Vicar, I am not a heathen," Lady Marlowe interrupted with her strange smile. "But needlework has little to do with religion, it seems to me, and I repeat to you, in times like these, my thoughts are too full of serious matters to notice it at all. 'Tis good of its kind, I can see." She stretched out her hand suddenly, and the long fingers caught Margaret's. "I would speak with you alone, child," she said, in that clear voice which men obeyed like a trumpet-call.

The girls fled first at a glance from Margaret. The three worthies made their bows, sped on their way by her smile that seemed to ask their pardon, Lady

Marlowe not condescending to notice their going at all. They hurried down the tower stairs and across the court as if the devil was driving them, with some lack of dignity, and it was not till they were safe in the street that Timothy Toste spoke first, trembling. “I fear,” he said, “I fear to leave Mistress Meg with that woman. Mark my words, she is a wicked woman.”

The Vicar crossed himself. “The woman despises the seemly worship of God,” he said: “I have heard of such; they tell me that in France and Italy there are many such. May the Holy Trinity bless the child! May the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Margaret, Virgin and Martyr, guard and keep watch over her!”

“Have no fear, brother Timothy and Sir Thomas, they surely will,” said little Simon cheerfully. “And wickedness will not have its way with our sweet Lady Meg; she can be as bold and fiery as her worshipful grandfather. She will drive out the devil as she drove out me, one day when I vexed her. I can tell you, friends, ’twas a word and a blow.”

The other two laughed, in spite of their anxiety.

When Lady Marlowe was left alone with Margaret she pointed to a stool beside her and told the girl to sit there. Turning to face her, she laid her two hands on her shoulders, and murmuring, “Look at me, child,” gazed long into the lovely, clouded eyes that were half unwillingly lifted to hers. As she looked, the smile about her mouth grew a little broader, but there was a line in her forehead, a slight raising of the brows, which quite took away any sweetness there might have been in the smile. Meg’s thoughts were confused under this strange inspection. What did Lady Marlowe mean, what did she want with her? No one had dared yet say a word to Meg of the Popinjay’s pretensions, and from the boy’s own looks she did not fear him. The thought of him did not even cross her mind at this moment; it was Harry, Harry, for whom her tired eyes and sad young mouth

were crying and mourning. Would Lady Marlowe speak of Harry? And behold, she did—for what else could she mean?

“So, pretty one, you would be my daughter!” she said under her breath; and Meg blushed sweetly, while her eyes softened and fell. “Nay, there is nothing to make you shame-faced,” Lady Marlowe went on. “The thing was no fault of yours. That face of yours, sweet Meg,—when I look at it well, I see beauty for which a man might well risk his honour, if not his salvation. You little country maid, you are a morsel for a prince, much more for a Baron, who seldom has the wit to choose so rightly. There, I like your pride,” as Meg turned her face away and tried to rise. “Be still, child. Now speak to me from that foolish heart of yours. Are you the only person, do you think, who is fretting for Lord Marlowe?”

It seemed as if the ice melted from Meg’s whole nature suddenly. She lifted both hands, then laid them on Lady Marlowe’s knees, and bowed her head upon them for a moment. Then she looked up and spoke, first laughing, then with quick tears and sobs that broke into her speech. “Nay, Madam, indeed, I know, I know how you are searching for him. Oh, I thank you for suffering me to speak. I thought, I knew, that you, his mother, of whom he talked to me, must feel kindly for me. You must understand all, though he could never tell you—but where is he? For God’s sake, Madam, tell me where he is, or my heart will break.”

“Child, do I know?” Lady Marlowe said quickly. “He went, it seems, to join the one he loves best,—yes, best in the world, Meg—another Margaret. That did not surprise me,—we know his lordship—though indeed a few hours seemed hardly long enough, even for him, and now I wonder still more. But if I thought he had joined the Queen, I should have no uneasiness. It is the fate of his men that distracts me, and alarms

me for his own. How could he have gone so far alone, on foot, in the snow ! ”

“ Yes, ’tis true.”

Meg was calm now. She sat very still, looking up at Harry’s stepmother. What was in Lady Marlowe’s mind ? She gazed straight before her with lips parted, eyes wide open, yet seeming at the moment to see nothing. What visions of danger and death were floating before her ? Presently Meg recalled her with a word, and life leapt back into the woman’s eyes like an agile beast of prey.

“ I thought,” the girl began, “ sometimes I think still, that my Lord never left Ruddiford. At the time I knew it was false, that story of his going.”

“ Are you mad, girl ? What do you mean ? ” The words flashed out like a sword from its sheath, but neither from voice nor eyes did Meg shrink.

It was the first time, since Antonio’s news of Harry’s departure struck her down, that she had put that extraordinary impression into words. “ It is false ! He is not gone ! ” she had cried then, and her grandfather, he and Antonio, had looked on her with pity ; but in Antonio’s eyes there was something else than pity, and she had never since borne to look upon him or speak to him as of old.

“ Tell me why you say this, and instantly. What befell him, if he did not leave Ruddiford ? Who knows the truth ? ” Lady Marlowe demanded sternly.

Meg, with paling cheeks and darkening eyes, told her all she remembered of that fatal Christmas Day, and my Lady listened with an intensity that lost no glance or tone. At last she smiled and shook her head. “ The young Italian,” she said, “ what motive had he for any foul play, he, whose monkey trick, as Sir William tells me, pushed my stepson over the line of honour ? Ha ! does he dare, perchance,—but why that trick ? If the creature, unworthy to lick the dust before you, dares to love you, Margaret, why then——”

"'Tis all a mystery," Meg said. "But indeed afterwards, he hated my Lord—I saw it, Madam, as I tell you, in his eyes."

"And you did not accuse him?"

"I lost my senses,—I knew nothing, and then it seemed an unreasoning fancy. And my grandfather loves Antonio,—and we played together for so long——"

"Ah! Too long, I doubt," Lady Marlowe, said, "too long for the Italian. You never gave him hope, you never——"

She broke off, warned by the indignant flash in the girl's eyes.

"You know, Madam, who he is," Meg said coldly. "But I may be slandering him. He may know no more than he says. I cannot tell."

"We will make sure," said Lady Marlowe, very low.

Leaning back in her chair, she let her eyes rest with a kind of pleasure on Meg's beautiful head, now bent thoughtfully. None of the girl's attractiveness was lost upon her. She was quite clever enough to appreciate the dignity and pure goodness which made so large a part of it.

"Margaret," Isabel said, with a curious, deep ring in her voice, "is it your belief that Harry Marlowe is dead,—done to death, perhaps by the jealousy of this Italian?"

"No; I do not think he is dead. If he were dead, he would show himself to me in a vision."

"The crystal might tell us; it should, if I were at home," her ladyship murmured. "Listen, Margaret." She laid one hand on Meg's head, and with the other raised her chin. "Your grandfather gives me charge of you," she said, in her quietest, most earnest way. "And I have a demand to make of you,—a simple one, truly, and I honour you by making it, but I would rather rule by love than fear, my beautiful child. I demand your entire trust and confi-

dence ; I ask your true and honest help in all my doings. First, my Lord Marlowe must be found or his fate known, and with that end you must spare no one. Neither fear nor favour nor ancient friendship nor pity must let you interfere between my designs and me. You agree, Margaret ? You place yourself in my hands ? You are as my daughter would be, if I had the good fortune to possess one like you ? ”

“ I am in your hands,” Meg said ; but Isabel’s quick instinct knew that a doubt still lay behind. “ You have a condition ? ” she said. “ Speak to me without fear.”

The red blood surged up again into Meg’s cheeks ; she took Lady Marlowe’s hand and touched it softly with her lips, and looked up into the resolute face that smiled upon her. “ Your object is mine,” she said. “ Find him,—give him back to me,—I am yours for ever.”

“ Foolish child,” Lady Marlowe said under her breath ; and she added aloud : “ If we fail, Meg, if death has him, or forgetfulness,—ah, you know little of life, you babe of sixteen years—then still you are mine, your future is mine. You trust me, Meg, and follow my leading ? You are loyal, and believe no lies of me ? I may reckon on you as a true and loving daughter ? ”

“ I am your true and loving daughter,” was Margaret’s answer. “ Give me Lord Marlowe,—and if he is dead, give him to me still—and if he has forgotten, no other man shall speak of love and marriage to me. But I know that cannot be,” and she laughed.

“ Those eyes, that mouth, that hair, might draw a dead man out of his grave,” Isabel muttered, half to herself. “ Well, child, my word upon it, you shall marry none but my Lord Marlowe. We will speak together again ; say nothing of this talk of ours.”

She too laughed, and stopping, kissed Meg upon the forehead and the eyelids, then rose quickly and left her, forbidding her to follow.

As she swept through the galleries, there were no ears in the thick walls to catch what she said, and luckily, for she talked to herself all the way. "Harry, Richard,—Richard, Harry—one Lord Marlowe is as good as another, and better still—if I can only be sure! Ah, my little Antonio, we shall see what you have to say to me."

Passing the embrasure of a window, she stepped into it and looked out on the broad rampart below. The sun was shining on two figures; a man's arm was round a woman's waist; her fair head lay against his bright green shoulder. The many colours of his smartly-cut garments, the golden hair that curled on his neck,—all, though his face was turned away, betrayed young Richard Marlowe.

"Fool!" said her ladyship, and stamped her foot, but went on her way laughing.

When she reached her own apartments, "Send for Master Antonio," was the order that she gave.

Chapter X

HOW MASTER ANTONIO'S FACE WAS SCRATCHED

ANTONIO was not unaccustomed to these sudden calls from Lady Marlowe. Ever since the day when he first bent his knee before her in her cabinet at Swanlea, it had been his place to amuse and interest her whenever her impatient human nature suddenly dropped its usual masks and restraints. He had always come to her with a perfect confidence of being acceptable ; the stern handsome face softened, the hard eyes swam in dreams, the whole creature became sweet and lazy, with this lithe, beautiful, mysterious animal at her feet.

To-day there was a touch of anxiety in the graceful haste with which he ran to her ; perhaps because he was aware of the success which had crowned his plan of throwing Alice Tilney in young Richard's way, a success hardly likely to please Richard's mother ; perhaps because of something, a look, a mocking touch, in the servant's manner who called him.

She received him with a smile. He knelt on her footstool ; she took his face in her two hands, a favourite trick of hers. Then a dangerous gleam came into her eyes, and he felt that her long nails were pricking his cheeks.

" Liar—traitor—villain ! " she said. " Where is my Lord Marlowe ? "

The young man's heart stood still. Flushing and paling, he knew for the first time what it was to be afraid of a woman. Thoughts rushed through his

brain. He had been betrayed, and by whom? Could it be Alice? It must be; who else at Ruddiford knew the truth? "I will punish her," he thought. "She thinks I love her, false girl! This is a pretty use to make of my trust in her. She must have told the Popinjay."

He was thinking under the fierce gaze of eyes that sought to read his soul. But another moment told him that the secret was still in his own hands.

"Where is he, Antonio?" said Lady Marlowe, now speaking less furiously. "I believe that you know the truth, if any one does. You demon in shape of a pretty boy, I believe you fancied his lordship in your way, and by some wicked means, perhaps with those long fingers, you put him out of it. You murdered him? where did you bury him? I will see his grave. But, miserable, did you fancy that the prize he coveted would be for you, you with your face like a god of the Greeks, born in some Italian gutter, and left there for an Englishman to pick up and bring to his unhappy family?"

Isabel laughed as she spoke, and again her nails made sharp dents in Antonio's smooth cheeks. He hardly noticed the pain, with such horrified wonder did he listen to her words. How could this woman know what not a living creature knew,—the height of his ambition, the depth of his scheming, the passion which he took such pains to disguise, and which, long smouldering, had leapt up like a devouring flame when he saw the sudden love between Lord Marlowe and Margaret, his lady, his adored. Alice could not have betrayed him here, for she suspected nothing. He had made love all the more hotly to her, foolish girl, that no one at Ruddiford or King's Hall might dream of the real object of his life. He knew, and it was a slight satisfaction, that Mistress Meg guessed a little what was passing, and despised them both. Sometimes he hated Meg as much as he loved her. "Ah, some day, my lovely lady, some day!" he

would say to himself half threateningly ; but how or when that day and its triumph were to be reached he did not know. It must suffice for him, by secret arts, to gather the threads of Margaret's life in his hands, to stop her marrying by fair means or foul, to keep his influence with Sir William and trust to some bold stroke in the confusion that might follow his death. For the old man grew feebler every day, and could not live long. And Antonio knew well that a mere suspicion of his designs in Sir William's mind, and Ruddiford would see the faithful secretary, the necessary youth, no more.

But how had his secret been revealed to Lady Marlowe ? Could Meg herself have guessed it ? Could his eyes have betrayed him ? Could that proud silence have hidden a resentment which had found words in talk with her ladyship ? The very thought seemed absurd to one who had known Meg from a child, worshipping the very stateliness which protected her from his familiarity.

However, there was no time for these questions now. He was kneeling at the feet of a perfectly unscrupulous woman, who had, as he guessed, more than one cause of anger against him. To her he had pretended that he loved no one, that in truth, till her ladyship deigned to give him a lesson or two, he hardly knew what love was. This supposed state of things had amused her considerably. Without an after-thought, she had played with her humble toy, and now, when some secret spring started up and hurt her a little, she was very naturally annoyed.

She let his face go, and he was glad, for the task of meeting her eyes boldly was a tiresome one. She slipped her right hand down by her broad belt, stiff with silver and jewels, and brought it back armed with a small fine dagger. Her fierce gaze still fixed upon him, though her mouth smiled, she held this before his face. Antonio did not quail.

"Mercy, Madam !" he said in his softest tones.

"But at the worst, I too wear a poniard—your ladyship's gift!"

It was true. Not the rich chain only had passed to Antonio from the coffers of Swanlea. The dagger he wore, its hilt set with precious stones, was an object of rather mocking envy to Ruddiford. Isabel's smile broadened.

"Brave boy," she said; "to stab a woman! a fitting close to your gay adventures! But mine, look you, is poisoned. The very littlest wound with mine,—before you have time to draw yours—Master Antonio turns green and dies. Pah! a vile death!"

She held the point near his throat. He made no movement but implored her with his eyes; and England at that day held none more eloquent. She laughed, and sheathed her little weapon, then gave him her hand, and he held it to his lips.

"Well, well, his master's daughter! 'tis a pretty ambition," she said. "Youth will be youth,—but you are a sweet liar, Antonio."

He thought of denying; but after all, it was useless. His soft eyes drooped as he said, "If it were so, your ladyship might think it a matter for pity."

She was silent for a few instants before she said roughly: "Then, madman, how was it you did your best to bring about the failure of Lord Marlowe's embassy? 'Twas you, as I hear, who turned the asking for his brother into asking for himself. That seemed a strange way to gain your ends, whatever they were."

Antonio stared. "There is nothing hidden from your ladyship. Who then told you this tale?"

"No less a person than your old master, villain."

"Ah, Madam, the devil himself put the words into my mouth. I did but whisper,—like a mocking echo in the room, I remember well—and I thought of no consequences. Verily to me, a man in despair, Madam, one Marlowe seemed as dreadful as another. If your ladyship knows my secret, I cannot tell how, you

may understand that such a man throws a ball no matter where,—he stops not to think,—and it may rebound within reach of his hand, Madam. Then, then, to dash it another way! Yes, the ball of fate,—he will end by flinging it along the path he means to follow.”

“Enough of your parables,” said Isabel. “Remember, such a man, especially if he lie to his friends, and betray those who trust him, may find his path end in death, or punishment worse than death. Remember that, Antonio.”

She watched his face. In spite of its beauty, the eyes and mouth had always a touch of cunning. Now that he found himself in a difficult place, both had hardened into a strong resolution she had never seen in him before. She noticed for the first time that the delicately made youth had a square brow and a chin of iron.

“I must kill him, or know all his secrets and bind him by interest to me,” she said to herself: then she murmured just above her breath: “And so, to carry out your parable, the ball did rebound within reach of your hand, and you threw it—where? Where is my Lord Marlowe, Antonio?”

“Madam, I cannot,” he began, stammering a little.

“Nay, good youth, you can, and you will,” said she. “Of the tale I have been told, how much is true? Did his lordship leave the castle alone, setting out over the moors, leaving a message for his men to follow him? That they did follow him, I know, to their undoing. But where is he? With Queen Margaret, or in some dungeon under our feet, or stark and dead upon the fells? Understand, I must know.”

“But why,—why, Madam—am I my Lord Marlowe’s keeper?” There was an agitation in Antonio’s voice and eyes which told Isabel, in spite of his effort at candid speech, that she was on the right track. “What reason have you,” he cried, “to doubt the

story that has been told? Who has taught you these suspicions?"

"Enough, dear liar; it is the truth I want this time. I am searching for my stepson, and I mean to find him, or to know his fate. If I were to say to you, bring him to me! I believe that you could do it. Unless indeed he is dead!"

Antonio shook his head slowly. "Your ladyship over-rates my power."

"Ah, possibly; but I do not over-rate my own. I whistle, and four strong men are with me. You know them, the men of my own guard. They tie you up to a beam in the guard-room, and there they question you a little more sharply than I do here,—so sharply, indeed, that you come back to me with your beauty spoiled for ever and a day. I shall not regret it; 'twill be no more loss to me than to any other of your supposed friends. By Our Lady, I'm weary of you, and I see that no one loves you, except the foolish old knight your master, and he is ready enough to tell tales of you. No," as he was hastily rising; "kneel where you are, or I whistle, Antonio. Consider, now,"—for he was once more motionless—"Now that I know your secrets, are not you wiser to work with me than against me, or even for your own hand? Nameless, penniless, depending for your future on the caprice of a country knight who takes the wrong side in the nation's quarrel, are not you wiser to throw in your lot with me? You pretended at Swanlea that you were my servant; now be my servant in reality, and I will answer for your future. 'Tis an easy choice that I offer you,—my service, body and soul,—or the question, Antonio."

All this time she held him with her eyes, and her left hand lay on his right shoulder, while the right, in the folds of her gown, grasped the little deadly weapon which would defend her from any desperate spring of her prey. Antonio's words came home to him: "My Lady Marlowe is not a woman to be played with."

It was no use, at this point, racking his brains to find out how she came to suspect him of knowing so much ; that she had guessed all his secrets without any human help, was more than he could believe, unless the stories of witchcraft were true. With rage in his heart he told himself that the woman spoke truth throughout ; no one at Ruddiford loved him, even the old master betrayed and contemned him,—no one but Alice ; and little as he really cared for her, he had a pang of jealousy at having given her over to Dick Marlowe's boyish love-making,—another cause of wrath to my Lady, if she had only known. However, she was right ; he was in her power, and the secret must out, no matter what the consequences. He felt fairly sure that she did not love her stepson ; he knew that her intentions as to Dick's marriage remained the same. It is true that his little plot to turn Dick against it by Alice's means seemed futile enough in her terrible presence. Other, stronger means, would be necessary to carry out his resolve that Margaret Roden should marry neither Marlowe. But he believed in his own star. At this moment it was a matter of saving his own soft skin, which he loved, after all, better than anything else in the world. And whatever her ladyship might do with the lost man, the Queen's man, he was sure that she would not marry him to Margaret.

Still, Lord Marlowe was her stepson, the head of her house, and men had died cruel deaths for less crimes than Antonio's. He thought of throwing the chief blame on Jasper Tilney ; but it seemed useless. Alice, the only witness, might turn against him then, for she loved her wild brother. No, the boldest plan was the safest. He put his hands together like a vassal doing homage, and Isabel took them between her own, stooping eagerly towards him.

"First," he said, "your promise of forgiveness. In a manner the thing was for your service. He would have married her."

"On all I hold sacred," she answered him,—perhaps it was saying little—"I swear that you shall not suffer from me for anything you have done."

She suspected him, then, of more than knowledge. Well, she was right. Kneeling there at her feet, he told her all, and with keen instinct perceived that the news of Lord Marlowe's captivity, in so near a prison as King's Hall, under so slight a guard, compared with the power she would bring to release him, as that of Jasper Tilney, was less welcome to her ladyship than the news of his death would have been.

She sat upright in her high chair with knitted brows, thinking deeply, her dark eyes staring into space over Antonio's head.

"This Tilney must be a poor-spirited creature," she said. "What does he think to gain by keeping my Lord shut up in his house? Mistress Margaret's favour?"

"He means to gain my Lord's promise to renounce the marriage, and then to send him off on his best horse to join the Queen. One would think," Antonio murmured, "that with such a condition the way of escape was easy. A man might be dispensed from such an oath——"

"Ay, *one* would think," mocked Isabel, "*one* born in the gutter. Come, your Tilney is a gentleman and knows the man he deals with, a fool, but a perfect knight. Well, well, thy news is none so good, Antonio. I would my Lord were further away. Why, a moment's freak, and this mad, freebooting fellow may release him, if it were but to annoy me and spoil the wedding with Richard—other plans, too—other and greater. Tell me, how many are there in Ruddiford who know this story?"

"None,—nay, one person only." Antonio felt suddenly sure that his own safety depended on his telling the exact truth, and was not unwilling that Alice should share his danger. As to Richard she had done her duty there; the Popinjay was caught,

and would not give up his fancy in a moment. Any little difficulty, indeed, would only add fuel to the fire, and Alice would never dare betray her brother and Antonio. "Mistress Alice Tilney, his sister, Mistress Margaret's companion and friend."

"What, a chattering girl? And she has kept such a secret from her friend? For whose sake?"

Half the truth must suffice here. "For her brother's sake, Madam; she loves him truly."

"But the risk is too great; it must cease," said Lady Marlowe. "A chattering girl, ever with Margaret—ha! Alice Tilney, a pink and white poppet with yellow hair! I have seen her. Ha, she leaves her friend, her mistress, to play with silks and old men, while her fair locks are tumbling on a young man's shoulder. I saw them on the rampart even now. My son, forsooth, and Mistress Alice Tilney! I thought 'twas some wardrobe maid, or even a damsel from the kitchen. Boys play these foolish pranks; not all are so discreet as thou, my pretty Antonio. But a Tilney,—well born, you say?—that is a serious matter. Dick shall hear my will. The woman must leave the castle. Go, fetch her to me instantly; and not a word to her of what you have told me. I am ignorant, remember. I have reason enough, God knows—this girl may tell Margaret,—she has bewitched Richard,—enough! Go!"

A few minutes later, and Lady Marlowe in grave and gentle mood received the girl with whom her son had dared to entangle himself. Alice feared her too much, in spite of this gentleness, to receive her admonitions with anything but meekness. In heart she was defiant enough. It no longer seemed an impossible thing that Richard Marlowe should marry her. He had sworn that he would. My Lady was plain-spoken, but she was civil, and she treated Alice according to her birth; the girl was neither offended nor unreasonably hurt. She wished that the door would open, that her new lover in his gay attire, with the merry

smile which was beginning to seem so much more attractive than Antonio's mysterious looks and ways, would come in and claim her at this happy moment. But no Popinjay came.

Lady Marlowe spoke of discretion, of the fitness of things, of the rash affections of young men, of the modesty proper to maidens. She wished the girl a good husband, but charged her to remember that Master Marlowe was bound in honour elsewhere. She told her that Sir William would that very evening, on her demand, provide an escort for Mistress Tilney to her home at King's Hall.

Alice flushed all over her pretty face, which had been pale. "King's Hall is scarce a fit place for me, Madam," she murmured. "My parents are dead, my brother——"

"Your brother must make it a fit place," said Lady Marlowe. "If you are old enough to dream of marriage, you are old enough to keep your brother's house. Find some old woman to be with you. Plainly, Mistress Alice, so long as I and my son remain here, you do not. But I will not send you without a word to your brother from me. Wait where you are."

She turned to the table, drew forward her writing-box, and presently after a few minutes of hurried scratching, finished a note which she then carefully sealed, writing on the outside, *On Master Tilney's private business, to be opened by him alone*. "Take that," she said "and give it to your brother," and then she dismissed Alice, who curtsied low and fled in a state of bewilderment.

Antonio, pale and bright-eyed, was waiting in the gallery. He caught her as she passed. "Alice, Alice! No such hurry! What said she to you, sweet?"

Alice shook off his hand impatiently. "Cannot you guess?" she said. "She is driving me from Ruddiford. If I dared, I would go straight to Sir William. But *she*, Antonio!"

"As well offend the fiercest wolf in the forest," he

whispered. "Alas, my pretty Alice, you must go. What paper have you there child?"

"A letter that she gave me for Jasper. Ah, so gentle, she was, but very angry! Was it you, *you*, who told her?"

"Told her what?" Antonio was startled.

"About Master Marlowe,—and me."

"I? no," he cried, relieved. "She saw you from a window, saw you together on the rampart, foolish girl. You might be prudent, if he is not. But after all, 'tis going a little far, Alice."

"Back, Antonio," she said, coldly, as he tried to draw her close and kiss her,—as of old. "You may scoff and call him the Popinjay; he is a better man than you, and not only because he is noble."

She slipped from him and darted away into the gathering twilight. He looked after her with an evil smile on his lips. "Trust a woman!" he muttered. "My Lady should watch you, sweet Mistress Alice. As for me, I stand alone; I care not!"

Chapter XI

THE FATE OF HER LADYSHIP'S LETTER

HIGH up in Margaret's tower, she and Alice Tilney slept in the same room. The young girls who waited on her and worked under her orders slept in the room adjoining; and Dame Kate, guardian of all, had her little cell on the staircase, a flight below. The old nurse was accustomed herself to attend on her lady's dressing and undressing; but in these latter days housekeeping matters often kept her in the kitchen regions till late at night, keeping order as best she could in the confusion of many guests and strange servants. Therefore Alice had taken her place to a certain extent, waiting on Meg the more carefully because of the barrier that had risen between them, letting her hands atone for the sins, if they were such, of her heart and mind.

On this evening Alice did not appear at her usual time. It was bedtime, and Meg was tired. She went up the winding stairs to her room, undressed and lay down after her evening prayers, in which she thanked God for giving her a kind mother in my Lady Marlowe. Certainly, for many weeks, she had not lain down to sleep with so comforted a feeling. At the same time, she was resolved to stay awake till Alice came, for, though too generous and too proud to call her to account, she was certainly angry with her. What kind of manners were these, to be wandering about the castle till late at night, when her duty was here, in this room? Again there came the tormenting unworthy suspicion of some secret understanding between Alice and Antonio; yet Mistress Meg was far from placing these two

on a level in her thoughts. She cared for Alice, more than Alice knew ; while for the last few weeks she had almost hated Antonio.

It was a brilliant February night ; not cold, with a smell of spring in the air, a deceiving promise that winter was over and gone. The moon was high in a cloudless air, and the pale light flooded the windows of Meg's tower and lay in long pools on the floor. It even reached the little silk-curtained bed, and kissed the girl's hands, flung out on the counterpane.

"I will not sleep," she thought. "I will lie awake till Alice comes. To-morrow I shall see my Lady again, and we will talk more. I am,—I am,—her true and loving——"

The heavy lids fell, and Meg was asleep, sound asleep without a dream. The moonlight crept slowly higher, and touched her eyelashes. Alice Tilney, wrapped for a journey, her travelling hood drawn round her face, came and stood between the bed and the window.

"Mercy, the moon will blind her !" she said to herself, and touched the curtain to draw it forward.

The movement woke Meg. She opened her eyes and sat up suddenly. Before she could speak, the other girl had thrown herself on her knees by the bed.

"Farewell, sweet one ! I must go," she said. "They will fetch me,—but they forget that I am yours, Meg. I have deceived you often enough,—ah, do not look at me so—but in this matter I will be true to you, Meg, my sister."

"What are you saying, Alice ?" murmured the sleepy girl, bewildered. "And where are you going,—and without my knowledge ? Take off that hood, I say, and go to your bed. Our Lady help us, it must be midnight."

"It is but ten," Alice said, her voice trembling a little with excitement or fear. "I am to leave you, Meg, my sweet. Not your order, but my Lady Marlowe's. She will not have me here ; and she has said a word to Sir William,—he cannot deny her,—he is

angry with me, too,—and they are sending me home this very night with an escort to King's Hall."

By this time Meg had started from her bed, and stood with bare feet on the floor, her long locks like a cloak of ruddy brown, falling to shoulders and waist, her face pale, her eyes wide and wondering in the moonlight. "But why,—why will not she have you here? I will go to her and tell her you are mine. Alice, why, Alice, my grandfather knows King's Hall is no fit place for you."

"Neither, it seems, is Ruddiford Castle,—for its own sake, not mine. Listen, Meg." She took Margaret's hands in hers, and drew her face near. She had forgotten any coldness, any rightful displeasure that her friend might feel. White with the new passion that now possessed her, growing in strength every minute, full of wild suspicions of Antonio, whom she had loved, and of rage against Lady Marlowe, whom she hated for more reasons than one, the resolution had seized her to spoil the game they were playing, to let Margaret know all that she knew. "Do not go to my Lady: even you will not move her," she said.

"What have you done to displease her?"

Meg now spoke a little coldly. Alice laughed. "They take Richard Marlowe for a boy," she said; "they call him the Popinjay. But he is a man in heart and courage, and if I chose to appeal to him this night, Meg, he would strike a blow before he would part with me. There, is that enough? I can tell you no more; but if he cares for me as he says, he may follow me to King's Hall. Let him be true to me, and I will marry no other man. Ah, English blood tells! Do not look on me as her ladyship did, Margaret. We Tilneys bear a name as old as any, and it is not because of his birth that my poor Jasper—but see you"—she laughed awkwardly—"this unwelcome suitor of yours, this Dick Marlowe, you need not fear him, Meg."

"I do not," Margaret answered her; "I never

did. His nature is written on his face. But oh, Alice, dare you trust the love of a boy? And—if my Lady is angry——”

“He is my Lady’s son, and has a will of his own,” Alice said.

For a moment they looked at each other. The bright colour had risen in both faces. Alice started at some distant sound, and was going to speak, when Meg, with a sudden movement, flung her arms round her and kissed her lips with the old loving embrace of months and years ago, of the old time when their friendship had first begun. Alice threw back her hood, and wrapped half her cloak round Meg; they sat down on the edge of the bed, the dark and fair curls mingling. Meg rejoiced, though ready to reproach herself—was it loyal to my Lady? But a certain gladness was irresistible. Alice did not know that the words “I thought it was Antonio,” lay beneath her friend’s smile.

Two years in age had always made a certain difference between them. If Margaret’s position was superior, Alice had an experience of the world and men of which Margaret was perfectly innocent. She was not like Alice, by nature a coquette. Men were nothing to her, till the sudden coming of Harry Marlowe taught her what love and life meant, only to leave her, as it seemed, to death and desolation. Alice had watched her with real pity, and only her loyalty to Jasper and Antonio had made the secret safe, while, as she told Antonio, she saw Meg’s heart breaking from day to day.

“But now, it is not I who have betrayed Jasper,” she said to herself. “And I will not have my Lord die by treachery, and she of grief, while I can save them.”

“Sweet baby,” she murmured; and as a mother might have done she drew Meg’s head to her breast and kissed her soft hair: then she whispered suddenly, “He lives,—your Harry lives! What will you give me for the secret now?”

Meg drew herself instantly upright, shook back her hair, and met Alice's laughing eyes with a sudden flame in her own which startled the lighter nature. "I knew that my Lord was alive," she said. "If you know where he is, tell me; and tell me too what wickedness has kept him from us so long."

"He is at King's Hall," Alice answered. "He has been a prisoner there since Jasper and his men took him on Christmas morning, ten minutes after he parted from you."

Meg rose to her feet, once more as white as death. "And you knew it?" she said.

There was such reproach in the words that Alice trembled and looked down. "What reason had I to love my Lord Marlowe?" she said, very low.

"But you say you love me!"

"I do, Meg, and that is why I have told you now."

"Jasper did it! Why?"

"For love of you; and he is my brother."

Meg gazed upon her as if turned to stone. The words, "Did Antonio know?" were on her lips, but she did not say them. She knew that Antonio knew. It seemed to her that out of the mists of uncertainty she was plunging into dark clouds of evil, though beyond these again the sun was shining with a brilliancy almost unimaginable. She could not yet understand what Alice had told her.

"A prisoner—at King's Hall?" she repeated. "If Jasper does not set him free, I shall hate him to my dying day. But he must, he shall; my grandfather will see to that, and my Lady his mother. Tell your Jasper that his miserable conspiracy has failed, and that I scorn him from the depth of my soul. Has he treated him well?"

"How should I know? Is this your gratitude?" Alice's eyes were full of tears.

Meg turned away impatiently. "I will go with you. Where is my gown?"

"No, Meg, that you cannot do. But,—though you

are hard to me—I promise you news of him. And if you choose to write a message, I will bear it faithfully. But haste, my dear ; even now they are coming to call me.”

Meg flew to her writing-box, a seldom-used treasure, the gift of her grandfather, which stood on a great oak-chest in her room. While she hastily lighted a taper, pulled out her materials and stooped to write with trembling fingers, Alice watched her in silence ; but her hand dived into the pocket of her gown, and she drew out, unseen by Meg, a small piece of paper, a note of which the seal was already broken,—for this was a trust to which Alice had not been true.

Meg's back being turned to her, she held this small letter up to the light and read it again. It was meant for her brother, and she had mistrusted it, and the woman who had written it. The reading of this treacherous letter had decided her to set Meg's heart at ease. No, Jasper should never see it. He would not, she hoped, have acted upon it ; yet it were best he should not feel his prisoner too much at his mercy. Lady Marlowe had written this to her stepson's rival and jailer : *He who stands in your way stands also in that of others. Why spare him ?* Alice crushed the cruel words in her hands, and thought of the fire not yet out in the lower room. She might have kept them as a witness against Lady Marlowe, but the woman was Dick's mother, strange as it seemed. She would neither let her be a murderer, nor have her accused of such an intention. The words should burn.

Even now she heard the distant tramp of heavy boots upon the stones, and she pulled up her hood and wrapped her cloak round her, saying softly, “Haste, Meg, haste !”

Meg's letter was not long. *Thank God, my lord, my love, that you still live. Your Meg loves you ever. She waits for you.* “Give it to him yourself, Alice,” she said. “And tell Jasper, if he does not set him free to-morrow morning, every man-at-arms in Ruddi-

ford will be at his gates ere noon. Ah, my Lady does not know?"

The heavy feet were on the stairs now, and there was a loud knocking at the lower door.

"Is Mistress Tilney within?" shouted a hoarse voice. "The litter and the men are ready."

Alice started, hesitated a moment. "I have not told her," she said. "'Tis Black Andrew. Sir William ordered him to take men and guard me home. Farewell, sweetheart! Keep you brave and happy! I am gone. Back to your pillows Meg, till the morning."

The door opened and shut. "I am here, Andrew," cried the girl. But as she hurried down the winding stairs, she turned into the room where the embroidery frames stood, and where a few red embers smouldered still upon the hearth. Into the middle of these she dropped Lady Marlowe's letter to Jasper, waited an instant to see it flame, and rushed down to her grumbling escort.

On the way she met Dame Kate, climbing slowly to her bed.

"Here's a pretty coil," said the old woman. "Saints defend us, and what are our maidens coming to?"

Such-like phrases pelted Alice hard, for indeed she and her precious brother were never favourites with the old nurse. But she could not stop to listen now, to quarrel with Dame Kate or defend herself. Without a word she fled past her, and great scandals as to Mistress Tilney and Master Marlowe were spread, uncontradicted, in Ruddiford.

The Popinjay slept in peace that night, dreamed of his pretty love, and woke smiling. But the latest gossip of the Castle was not long in reaching him. His dressing, a matter of deep interest and delight, was quite spoilt by the news his servant gave him, that Mistress Alice Tilney had been sent to her home, the night before, with little notice and without any farewells, closed up in a horse-litter and guarded by half a dozen of Sir William's men with Black Andrew to lead

them. They had come back in the small hours of the morning, and they said 'twas a pity so fine a young lady had not a better home to go to, for King's Hall was a bear-garden for roughness and wickedness, a meeting-place for the wildest men in the country, and if Master Tilney was the best of his Fellowship, as folks reported, that was not saying much for him. Even Black Andrew wondered at his old master's orders, but could only obey them.

"The silly old knight! What maggot has he got in his foolish head now!" cried Richard in consternation. "Nay, booby, the blue gown. I'll go mourning to-day; I've no heart for red or yellow. Ha, I'll soon tell his worship what I think of him! Why, she's the lady I mean to marry,—and you may say I told you so. Enough,—there,—I'll go first and complain to my Lady."

The man looked after him, grinning, as he stalked out of the room. Everybody knew it was at Lady Marlowe's request that Mistress Tilney had been sent away: everybody knew that her ladyship intended this son of hers for the young heiress of Ruddiford; and if everybody was aware of Mistress Margaret's passionate fancy and anxious grief for the mad Lord, as well as of Master Richard's violent flirtation with Mistress Tilney (whose intimacy with Antonio the secretary was not unknown) everybody was naturally too wise to imagine that any of these weaknesses would incline the scales of fate one way or the other. As Sir Thomas Pye pointed out sorrowfully to Timothy and Simon, the Baroness Marlowe ruled the roost. Contrary to the opinion of his three most faithful friends, Sir William had chosen to entrust her with deciding the fate of Ruddiford and of Margaret. With that act of his the troubles began. And it seemed the more unnecessary, now that the cause of Lancaster was triumphing in the South. Among King Henry's faithful followers a husband might have been found for Meg, a future master for Ruddiford whose brain

was not unsteady like Lord Marlowe's, and in whose family there was no suspicion of that leaning to York which seemed to explain the mysterious ways of my Lady Isabel.

Those of Isabel's household wondered sometimes if she ever slept. Morning and night she was always the same, her wits never clouded, her humour seldom changing. Like more famous women, she might order a man to be hanged and a dinner to be cooked without any difference of tone. When most angry, she seldom lost her self-command, and could mock where others raged.

Young Richard came to her that morning, flushed and furious, yet half dazed from his long night's rest, the rest of a lazy animal that did nothing but play. She might have been sitting in council all night long, preparing to receive him. She laughed at his indignation, when she at once and frankly confessed that the banishment of Alice Tilney was her doing, that Sir William had consented at her request. Did she know, Richard stammered, that Mistress Tilney's brother was a large land-owner with a fine house and following of his own, and that there were few older names in the Midlands?

"I know it well, Dick," she answered, smiling. "And I grant you the girl is pretty and fairly mannered. Her height measures well with yours. Her head lies well on your shoulder. Your hair is the reddest, but hers is a pleasant colour, and that green velvet coat of yours—yes, I saw you on the ramparts yesterday," she went on with a sudden change of tone; "and since she is well-born, and you might therefore be seized with some dream of marrying her, I decided to send her away from the Castle."

Richard's red cheeks became even deeper in tone. He drew himself up with an air of dignity:

"Not only, Madam, do I dream of marrying her; I will and shall marry her, and no other woman."

"You have a virtuous intention," said Lady Marlowe.

"Law and religion, it is true, only allow you one wife. If you might have two, matters could be arranged to please you. As it is, your one wife will not be Alice Tilney, but Margaret Roden."

Dick stamped his feet on the floor. "I swear by all that's holy," he cried, "I will not marry Margaret Roden. Even if she were not promised to Harry—and why should I take his leavings?—I don't like her, I could never love her as I love my sweet Alice. She is cold, she frightens a man, she looks away, while Alice smiles in your face and draws you on with those blue eyes of hers. No, she's Harry's fancy, let him have her! I tell you, Margaret Roden is not the wife for me!"

He shouted aloud in his excitement. His mother held up her hand to check him, to reason with the wild boy; she was very pale, and her eyes were shining dangerously. "Your will against mine, Dick," she murmured, and then, louder, "I believe that our poor Harry is dead."

She was about to say more, but there was a shaking in the curtain that covered the door, and both her attention and Dick's were instantly caught by it. The latch was raised slowly, the curtain pushed back, and Margaret stepped lightly into the room, bowed her head towards Richard with a smile that startled him, made her reverence to Isabel, and came close to her.

The young girl looked radiantly beautiful. A different creature was this from the Margaret Roden they had hitherto seen. Even the day before, when she had drawn so near to Lady Marlowe, her lovely youth had been spoilt and clouded by sadness. Isabel had guessed then what she might be in brighter days, but now, even she, with her clear sight, was astonished. A creature of the dawn, flushed with love and joy, Meg came to bring her triumphal news to Lord Marlowe's nearest ones.

"I have good tidings," she said, and kneeling, laid

her hands on Isabel's. "My Lord Marlowe lives,—he is well, I hope—he is near—this very day, if my message does not fail, he will be with us. But if he does not come we will send ; my grandfather's men will quickly have him out of his prison."

She knelt, gazing into Lady Marlowe's face. Single-minded as she was, it would have needed thicker perceptions to fail to see what she did see,—a flash of wrathful terror instantly veiled by a smile.

"Indeed, sweet Meg," her ladyship murmured. "And where, then,—but who gave you this wonderful news ?"

"What ? Brother Harry safe and well ?" Dick's voice was chiming in on the other side, boyish and hearty, his own grievance forgotten for the moment. "Do you hear, Madam ? Does that arrange matters ?" He broke into sudden laughter.

Neither Isabel nor Margaret seemed to hear him.

Before either could speak again, a sudden clamour and tumult in the castle court broke upon their ears and strangely claimed their attention. Surely it was the voice of the old man, Sir William Roden. Loud but trembling, he was making some announcement from the steps of the hall—"Victory—the King—the Queen"—these words reached them, and then instantly the men-at-arms began to shout and the trumpeters to blow. And then, over all the noise and martial music, in the pale sunshine of that February morning, breaking and falling in silvery clangour above castle and town, the church bells burst into a peal of joy ; the very air seemed to rock with them,—
"Victory ! victory !"

Unconscious of herself, Margaret knelt on, with parted lips watching the change in the face of her whose loving daughter she had promised to be. At first Lady Marlowe seemed turned to stone ; then a look of evil fury transformed her. Suddenly rising, pushing the girl away, with an angry cry of, "What is this ?" she was going hastily to the window, when the door

opened and Antonio appeared. He seemed to see no one but her as he bowed low and said ; "Madam, Sir William Roden has sent me to announce to your ladyship the Queen's great victory at St. Albans. The Earl of Warwick has fled ; the King is free, and has joined the Queen."

"Ha ! Fine news, truly !" Isabel said, with a catch in her breath. "Go back to Sir William ; I follow you instantly."

Antonio looked from Richard to Margaret, and vanished as she commanded. She too looked at them, at their young, puzzled faces, and laughed. Then she walked quickly across the room. Richard sprang to overtake her, but was too late. She passed through the door, banged it heavily, turned the great key with a grinding noise in the lock, and left the boy and girl together.

Chapter XII

THE FLIGHT OF THE POPINJAY

RICHARD MARLOWE tried and shook the door, stamped, shouted aloud, "Madam, Madam, this is too much!" swore a few courtly oaths very strange to Margaret's ears, then dashed to the window and seized its iron bars, which effectually stopped any wild idea of escape that way. He thrust his yellow head between them, however, and joined his voice to the clamour below. He saw his mother's velvet train sweeping up the steps into the hall, as she went to Sir William. A man or two looked up and laughed, but most of those in the court were Roden retainers, and the angry cries of an imprisoned Popinjay were nothing to them.

At last Dick turned and looked at Margaret. 'Twas no such hardship after all to be shut up with so lovely a girl. To his eyes, of course, she had not the attractiveness of Alice Tilney, and he was still at a loss to understand his brother's sudden infatuation. Still, no doubt, she was beautiful. But why was there that horrible sadness, that bewildered, distressed look, on a face which should be laughing with joy at his brother's safety? Was his own company so terrible, then, or what was the matter with Mistress Margaret?

"Lord, how I hate these dismal ladies!" said Dick to himself; yet on the other hand, the kindness and chivalry of his young nature were all on Meg's side. He came to her where she stood, courteously offered his hand, and made her sit down near the fire.

"Your very humble servant, Mistress Roden," he said with a merry laugh. "As it has pleased my Lady to leave us together, we had better be friends than enemies. This news of my brother,—I care for that more than for victory of Red Rose or White—tell me more, I beseech you. Where is Harry, if you know it? Where has he been hiding, and when will he be here?"

Meg looked at him as he strutted before her on the hearth. She clasped and unclasped her hands, not at once answering him. The distressed lines on her brow, the tragic question in her eyes, vexed and puzzled the young man more and more.

"Listen, Mistress," he said; his air, for Dick, was of extraordinary gravity. "When you came into this room, you looked as happy as a queen, happier than the Queen, I doubt, though they say she has her poor old Harry again—Heaven save us, Harry and Margaret, Margaret and Harry—was there ever so strange a chance! A Margaret with two Harrys, forsooth—that's not you! and a Harry with two Margarets—that's who it may be! There, now, pretty sister, pardon my chatter and tell me all the truth." He came near and dropped on one knee, laughing again as he looked up into her face. She smiled and put out her hand to him; he kissed it lightly. "A fair, soft hand," he said. "Harry cheated me, and though I've forgiven him, as a Christian should, I see my fate might have been a worse one."

"Do not flatter me, sir," Meg said. "I heard you but now as I came through the ante-room. There,—I do not understand all your chatter, as you call it, but I love your brother, you love my friend—shall we be friends, Master Marlowe?"

"Mistress Roden, I have no stronger desire. But one favour, fair lady,—let us be Meg and Dick, as sister and brother should. What I said but now—my mother provoked me—you would have been more sorry had I said I would have no wife but you."

"Sorry indeed,—for your disappointment," Meg said, her mouth trembling with laughter.

"The length of your eyelashes, Meg—have they been measured?" Dick asked very softly. "On my honour, I begin to think that if Harry had never been here, and if I had never seen her who——"

"Collect yourself,—set your mind at rest," Meg admonished him. "On my honour, I would never have married you."

"But why, fairest, why? It cannot be the same cause for which I swear on second thoughts I would never have married you,—that with all your divine beauty you are too solemn and too cold."

"No,—because you are too foolish and too young."

"What,—my youth and beauty a reproach? 'Tis true, Harry is old and ugly——"

Meg laughed outright. Handsome enough he was, the young dandy, but that stiffly curled hair, that painted face, those cleverly darkened eyelashes! She shrugged her shoulders, moving her hands impatiently. After all, the boy was both amusing and sincere.

His love for Alice had in these last days awakened his lazy character and made a man of him, but Meg did not realize that. She began to give Dick credit for being by nature worthy to be Harry's brother.

"I am perplexed," she said. "I know not what to think. Surely my Lady your mother loves him,—loves Harry? Yesterday she promised me that if I would trust her, leaving myself in her hands, I should marry my Lord Marlowe and none else"—she stopped, suddenly remembering that Lady Marlowe had told her to be silent. "Well, no more of that," she said. "But when I brought her the news to-day, she did not, I thought, seem glad. She hardly listened, she was very angry, I fancied, but fancy it must have been——"

"Sweet sister, a warning," Dick said very kindly. "Never trouble your poor brain with trying to understand my mother. She is led by motives that you

and I dream not of. Why, now, has she set her heart on marrying me and you? 'Tis no special advantage for you or me,—we are toys in her hands—but she wants Ruddiford, Meg,—'tis a key to the north; she wants it for York, I tell you. Edward of March is her king. As to caring for Harry,—he is the head of our house, but then, she is nought to him but a step-mother; 'tis not a tie of love, Meg, and he is Lancastrian to the marrow of his bones.”

“Ah! they said it,” Meg murmured to herself, remembering whispers that she had heard and scorned.

“'Twas the news of this victory that drove her away in a rage,” Dick went on, watching her. “And more than that, you came at a bad moment, for she was angry with me, and I with her. They have dared to send Alice Tilney away, but I will take order for that.”

“But,” Meg said slowly, “she said that I should marry my Lord Marlowe and none else. How, then, would she gain Ruddiford?”

Dick laughed a little awkwardly, “She believed that Harry was dead,” he said.

“And you, then—you—impossible!” the girl cried, and lifted her hands. “Is there no truth under heaven?”

Dick shrugged his shoulders. “Plenty, sweet Meg, as you and I will prove,” he said. “Why so sad? A woman's plots need not have power to distract you thus. She cannot, shall not, marry us against our will. Come now, I ask you for news of Harry. Where is he, can you tell? And when will he be here?”

“He is in prison at King's Hall,” Meg answered, half absently. “Alice told me last night, before they sent her away. It is all an evil plot that I cannot understand. They took him,—Jasper Tilney took him,—but that it was his doing only, I will not believe.” She looked up into Dick's face grave and eager, and her eyes brightened as they met his. “You at least

are honest," she said. "Come with me to my grandfather. He will give you men, and you shall fetch my Lord home to Ruddiford."

"At King's Hall? And Alice told me nothing! Does my mother know he is there?"

"Nay, you have heard what I said. There was no time to tell her more. Yet, I think there are those in this castle who know, and I do not trust. Oh, quickly, quickly, come to my grandfather!"

"Who is it you do not trust, fair lady? I will soon make him safe!"

Meg looked away at the fire, and shook her head. She seemed, in the glow of the burning logs, to meet a darker flame, that which burned in Antonio's eyes. She shuddered, and rose to her feet. "There is no time to lose. Come, come!" she said.

Dick did not move. "You forget," he said. "We are locked in; we are my Lady's prisoners. And if we were free, what use going to Sir William when she is there? Harry back,—she loses you and Ruddiford. No, she will not have him here. I do not say she wishes him ill, but if Harry were away with his Queen on a battle-field, he would be a safer man than now. Let her know he is in so near a prison, and there he will remain. No, we must rather—but what of all this? We are locked in." He sprang up and strode to the window. "Down there," he said, "there is not a man who dares set us free."

Meg listening, as if in a dream, started with a sudden memory. "Dick," she said, "from your mother's bed-chamber there is a secret staircase to the outer barbican, and from there I know a certain way by steps into the town. No one uses it; 'tis forgotten, and never closed, except in times of riot. By that way you can leave the castle, slip round to the bridge, taking a horse and man, if you choose, from the stables on your way. Ride hard across the bridge, and follow the south road till a lane strikes off across broad fields to the right. Do you not remember, as you

came, the church and the high gables of King's Hall ? Harry is there."

"And Alice !" he said, half to himself. "Come, then, and quickly."

By a door under the hangings they stole into Lady Marlowe's inner room. All was still and silent there, except for the distant music and the clanging of joy-bells from the town for Lancaster's victory. Men and maids were all gone to gape with their fellows among the rejoicing crowd. Only some of Lady Marlowe's men went about dark and sullen, knowing on which side her sympathies were.

As they passed through, Dick seized a cloak and hood of his mother's and threw them on Margaret. She took them without question and silently led the way down the narrow stairs and through the outer precincts of the castle. The steps she had spoken of were open and unguarded ; they climbed the wall, and crept down, steep and uneven, in the shadow of the gateway tower ; ending at a narrow wicket, unfastened, but within view of the warder of the gate, had he been at his post ; but he was away, drinking success to the Red Rose. In a few minutes Dick and Meg were in the dark, evil-smelling lane without the walls, not far from the sacred spot, then white with December snow, now black with February mud, where Lord Marlowe and his love had stood together on Christmas morning.

Dick's eyes,—they had lost their old lazy indifference and flashed boldly enough now—rested with some wonder on his companion. She had pressed on before him, saying nothing of turning back, but she now stopped and said, looking hurriedly up and down the empty lane : "I am thinking,—to take horse from the Castle, we must enter again from the west gate, and though they would open the little postern to me, there might be those who—will you trust me, I will take you to one who would give me all he has—surely the horses in his stable——"

She was hastening on, turning from the lane into a narrow street darkened by over-hanging houses, when Dick caught hold of her cloak : " Meg, you will not go with me ? "

" Peace, peace," she said quickly. " Yes, I will go with you. I have thought,—he must not come back to Ruddiford, the enemies are too strong. And I fear he will, for I sent him a token by Alice last night. He must go back to the Queen, but I must see him first ; and, forsooth, I tell you, if he will have me, I will go with him to the ends of the earth. That was what we promised, he and I."

" A moment," Dick cried impulsively. " By the saints, you are a noble girl, and I honour you, and forgive Harry his sin ; but they say King's Hall is not a place for such as you. They say 'twas cruel and wicked of Sir William to send Alice home, did my Lady press him never so hard. That brother of hers,—she told me he would marry you if he could—curse his impudence, but small blame to him ! And his rollicking Fellowship—and suppose he will not set Harry free ? "

" Who can tell, if no one asks him ? " cried the girl. " And I trust no one but myself and you. Here, this is the way. No, I do not fear Jasper Tilney ; there are worse men, I think, than he."

She darted suddenly under a low archway into a little cobbled yard surrounded with doors and long windows, arched with clustering ivy. Within one of these doors they could hear a horse stamping ; from one of the windows, the lattice standing open, there came a strong smell of drugs and herbs. Close by was a dovecote, from which the pigeons rose, spreading wings and tails with a great rustle, and perching on the uneven roofs and chimneys with a soft cooing among themselves. A pale sun shone down into this abode of peace. As Dick and Margaret crossed the stones, a little old man raised his round face from the table he was leaning over, busily

concocting medicines. For this was the dwelling of Simon and Timothy Toste, and the window was that of Master Simon's apothecary's shop.

Astonished at the sight of the two young people, he pulled off his black cap and hurried out into the yard, begging them to honour him by coming in. Dick, rude boy as he was at times, stood shaking with laughter at the odd little figure, almost as broad as it was long. He laughed still more at the lengthening of the round face, when Simon understood, as he quickly did, what the beloved young lady of the castle wanted of him. His horse—and Timothy's horse—both their horses? And what for? A ride in the country with Master Marlowe? A side-way glance seemed to tell Master Marlowe what Master Simon the apothecary thought of him. They had come to one of the most arrant gossips of the Midlands, though one of the best-natured men. Simon knew all that went on at the Castle, and the summary expulsion of Mistress Alice Tilney had already reached his ears, with the Castle comments on the same. Simon saw through the mad prank at once. Could not this graceless Marlowe go hunting alone for his love, but he must needs entangle Mistress Meg and carry her with him to the very arms of wild Jasper?

"With Sir William's and my Lady Marlowe's consent?" asked the wise Simon, putting his head on one side and pursing up his mouth. "But then, why not your worship's own horses? Saving your presence, 'tis like King David and the poor man's lamb. These two good humble beasts of ours——"

"There, Master Toste, you know well they are the best horses in Ruddiford," cried Meg impatiently. "And I could not dream you would refuse me anything, *me*—and on this joyful day when the bells are ringing, and all the men in the castle are drinking success to the Red Rose."

"Silly sots, they'll come to me to-morrow to have their aching pates cured!" said Simon. "A ride in

the country, you say, Mistress? The country is not so safe, what with bold beggars and Master Tilney's Fellowship; and with this young gentleman alone—'tis not seemly——"

"Who asked you to judge of seemliness, Master Apothecary?" cried Dick, with a threatening air. "Fetch out the horses as Mistress Roden bids you, or I'll teach you a lesson."

Simon was not to be intimidated. He set his arms akimbo and faced the young man with a smile.

"That is not the way to gain your ends at Ruddiford, Sir," he said. "I will ask Mistress Roden to step within, and to tell me more of this precious ride. I am an executor of her grandfather's will, and, in a certain sense, share her guardianship with my Lady your mother. I will not suffer you——"

"Hold thy tongue, old fool," laughed Richard. "I shall not run away with your mistress—is that your fear? She will tell you, my service is due in another quarter. If she rides with me to visit her friend, do you know of any danger at King's Hall that I cannot guard her from?"

"Plenty, young gentleman," Simon replied with dryness.

But then Meg seized her old friend by the arm and pushed him before her into the low dark room, leaving Dick, with a parting glance that implored patience, to kick his heels alone in the yard. It was not to be expected that Master Marlowe would long be contented so. By way of amusement, it occurred to him to inspect the horses and judge of them for himself. They were excellent horses, in fact; Meg's praise was deserved. Without asking further leave the young gentleman set himself to look for saddles and bridles, and to prepare them for a journey.

It was a strange sight in Simon's little room, and one which Dick would scarcely have endured. The beautiful Mistress Roden, the Lady of Ruddiford, was on her knees beside the apothecary. To him,

the old friend, who had doctored and watched and petted her from childhood, often repaid with rebellious ingratitude, Meg poured out her heart in hurried sentences. Simon's eyes grew rounder, his hair stood up on his head! What? Lord Marlowe was at King's Hall, taken and kept by Jasper in private jealousy? What? There were traitors in the Castle, those who took the side of York, so that his lordship, if set free, could not safely return there? Simon lifted his brows and clicked his tongue meaningly. "Ah, said we not so? Timothy's friends said it—ay, in high places—but nay, is it possible, is it natural, Mistress Meg?"

"Peace, peace, I tell you nothing," cried the girl. "Say not a word; hold thy tongue, Simon, and imagine nothing. Only let me go, dear Simon, lend me thy horse and let me go with his brother, who loves him. We two will save him,—Simon, dost hear, dear old friend?"

"I hear, mistress." The apothecary shook his head and groaned. "And his worship Sir William?" he said. "No, child. If I lend thee my horse, I am the worst traitor of all. I might open the gates to a Yorkist army and be a less sinner, for to Sir William, to the Vicar, my brother and myself, your body and soul, child, are worth the realm of England. As to this mad Lord of yours, let Jasper Tilney keep him, say I."

"Well and wisely said, Master Toste," murmured a soft voice close by. "And now, have you any ratsbane?"

Margaret started violently and rose from her knees. Antonio was standing in the room, very white, staring and smiling strangely. At the same moment another door was pushed open, and two more figures appeared, tall and short, with lanthorn jaws and eyes that watched curiously,—Sir Thomas Pye and Timothy Toste.

Without a word to any of these new-comers, Mistress Margaret glided to the window and leaned out of it. "Master Marlowe," she called.

Instantly young Marlowe appeared from the stable, leading the best of the two horses. "Can you ride a man's saddle?" he asked gaily. "Or will you mount behind me? All is ready."

"Go yourself! I cannot come. Take my greeting. Set him free, send him away, tell him I am true till death and afterwards."

She turned from the window, meeting Antonio with a smile of fearless scorn, while Timothy and Simon rushed into the yard crying, "Stop, thief!" and the Vicar stood grimly by with his arms folded.

Dick Marlowe kissed the tips of his fingers, swung himself into the saddle and dashed under the archway and along the narrow street towards the bridge, at a pace which much amazed the strong and quiet horse he rode.

The shrieks of the owners availed nothing. Antonio laughed silently; it was no affair of his, since Master Richard rode alone. As for Margaret, she turned to Sir Thomas and said, "Come with me."

The priest bowed, and followed her. Antonio waited till the two brothers came panting back, and then renewed his demand: "Master Simon, have you any ratsbane?"

Lady Marlowe, walking restlessly up and down Sir William's room, forgetting her usual formalities in the excitement of the time and the difficulty of gaining her ends, found herself standing in the great window when a single horseman rode furiously upon the bridge, scattering groups of country-people whom the ringing of joy-bells had drawn to the town. It seemed that the guards at the bridge-tower made no difficulty about this horseman; he rode through the midst of them, bending on his horse's neck, and the ground flew from under him as he galloped out into the country. Muffled in a cloak about the head and shoulders, he was not to be recognized, yet something in the line of the slight figure, in the way he sat his horse, puzzled my Lady

a little. No, it could not be. She had Dick safe, locked in with Margaret ; she smiled at the thought.

She turned sharply towards the old man, sitting crouched in his chair ; he had returned there painfully, and the interview with her had already brought on a reaction, in his feeble body and mind, from the joyful excitement caused by the Red Rose victory. "A messenger has ridden forth, Sir William ; did you send him ?" Isabel demanded.

"Nay, nay, my Lady, I have sent no messenger."

"Who, then—" she paused, and muttered to herself : "Bribes may do something, and if my men be outnumbered, still they are better and stronger men. But a riding post to Edward—it may be wise—who would have thought these fools cared thus for the poor madman and his virago wife ? To rid myself of idiots—if I am opposed too far—Antonio——"

She glanced nervously towards the door. At first, Antonio had been present at the interview ; but after a few minutes she had sent him suddenly away with a commission. "Fetch me ratsbane, a great dose," she said, and meeting his startled eyes, "Where are your wits ?" she added, sharply and low. "My rooms are infested ; day and night they run on the floor. Go,—do my bidding."

Both glanced at Sir William, but he did not notice them. His mind was full of the fight at St. Albans, of which a running post had brought him the particulars. The man was now feasting below in the hall ; but Sir William had many questions yet to ask him, and his brain was occupied with them. Old memories of Agincourt, too, surged up at the very mention of a battle. He had begun to talk of it, and he was not best pleased that Lady Marlowe cut him short, as to victories old and new, to demand with some haughtiness the immediate marriage of her Richard and his Margaret. Why, he rather faintly wondered, this sudden and passionate haste ? He answered her doubtfully, inclined to put the question by. Then she sent away

Antonio ; if he noticed it, he was glad, for the watchful presence seemed a little out of place in their talk together. These family matters,—but why did she plague him with them when he must think of other things ? The children must be married, he supposed, though poor Meg liked it not. But what was my Lady demanding now ?

She had walked back from the window, and was standing near him on the hearth.

“ Sir William,” she said, “ I shall be forced, I fancy, to return home. The fighting about London—the charge of my Lord Marlowe’s house and people—wherever he, poor soul, may be—” she paused shuddering suddenly in spite of herself, and watching the old man with dark eyes full of terror and mystery. “ Send for your Vicar,” she said, “ and let us marry Richard and Margaret this very day in your chapel—quickly—before noon. Yes, I know Ruddiford people would ask for a stately marriage in their church yonder, but good Lord, these are not times for ceremony. The changes of war are sudden and terrible—to-day Lancaster, to-morrow, perhaps, York. Besides, unhappily, we have not to do with a willing bride and bridegroom. You and I have checked Richard in his foolishness ; Margaret, sweet maid, has promised to be my true and loving daughter ; still it is not each other they would choose. Therefore, haste, haste, is the one thing. They must be married, they must be one ; then only shall I feel that the future is safe,—for Margaret, for Richard, and for me.”

She stopped and waited. The old man looked at her vaguely. Mild, white, helpless, it seemed impossible that he should resist those fierce eyes, that resolute jaw. But he lifted his hand, as if to wave her away, and there was lit up suddenly, brightening every moment, a flame in the blue eyes that could on occasions be so angry.

“ Madam, I see no such haste,” he said. “ There will be no marriage to-day. I rejoice that my Margaret

has spoken dutifully to your ladyship, but, I plainly tell you, no such marriage shall be forced upon her. It is my wish,—she knows it,—but, putting the past aside, she may well feel that the youth who could set Mistress Tilney before herself——”

“No such trifles must stand in the way,” Lady Marlowe said, and restrained her rage with difficulty. “Children’s fancies—their duty must and shall be forced upon them. This is new teaching indeed, of an indulgent grandsire,” she laughed. I will answer for Richard,” she said, “my child, my chattel; and as to Margaret——”

“Madam,” the old man said, and sank back in his chair, “I am weary of this dispute.”

Sweeping through the door, Isabel met Antonio on the stairs. “Go to your master,” she said. “This fine victory is too much for his brain. Give him a cordial; then come to me, And the ratsbane, hey?”

“The apothecary had it not, or would not give it me,” Antonio muttered.

“Fool! You will over-reach yourselves, you folks of Ruddiford,” she said. “You cannot keep a secret. Mistress Margaret knows all.”

“And when she finds her birds flown, and Master Dick——” Antonio breathed, hurrying to his old master.

Pale and trembling, cursing Alice’s tongue, he was yet not altogether discontented.

Chapter XIII

THE CAGING OF THE POPINJAY

JASPER TILNEY was cautious enough in locking up his prisoners, but in other ways he and his household were as careless as they were wild. Young Dick Marlowe rode hard without meeting a soul along the highway and through the fields, and arrived before the rambling old house to find the courtyard-gates open and not a man to be seen. He dashed in without drawing rein, only received by the loud angry barking of a dozen dogs, several of which rushed upon him fiercely. Throwing himself off his horse, he laid about him smartly with a whip he had snatched from Master Toste's stable. Then, warned by the noise, a serving-man came out on the steps that led to the great door.

Dick demanded to see Master Tilney in a manner all the more proud and swaggering that he was practically unarmed, having nothing defensive about him but this same whip and a small dagger at his belt.

"Ay, Master Tilney is within. Who wants him?" said the man, staring at the lonely young rider with curiosity and contempt.

"Go to your master, varlet," said Dick, "and tell him that Master Marlowe has come to visit him."

"Marlowe," the man repeated, staring harder. He turned and went back into the hall.

"Mannerless knave!" said Dick, and bounded up the steps after him.

Within the doors there was a clattering of trenchers and tin cups, as well as of hoarse voices that ceased as their owners listened to hear who was without, and why the dogs were barking.

"'Tis a young fellow riding alone, who asks for your worship," said the serving-man. "He calls himself Marlowe—Master Marlowe. He looks for all the world like a popinjay."

"Why 'tis the Popinjay!" shouted Jasper Tilney from the upper table where he sat with some of his Fellowship, the servants dining below, for the ways of King's Hall were old-fashioned. "The Popinjay," he repeated, and laughed loudly. "A bold rascal, truly! Fetch him in, Robin; he shall dine with us. Alone, say you?"

One of his friends began to growl, "We want no more Marlowes here." Another wondered if the lad had brought a ransom. All stared under fierce brows at young Richard, as he strode from the outer sunshine into the hall, where a great blazing fire lit up the long crowded tables, the blackened walls hung with arms and trophies, the heavy, cobwebbed beams of the dark roof.

Servants, male and female, men-at-arms, then those who passed for gentlemen, the wild Fellowship of King's Hall, with Jasper Tilney himself, handsome, soldier-like, but fierce and savage-looking, standing up in the midst—Dick, a petted boy never away from his mother, had come from the ultra civilization of Swanlea to the simpler life of Ruddiford Castle, and there had met with what he thought hardships; but at King's Hall he had reached a lower deep than he had known. Flourishing his cap in his hand, holding his curled head high, with eager eyes searching for Alice, yet glad in his heart not to find her in such company, he pranced up the hall, down which his host now came to meet him.

"Pretty babe! Look at his curls, and his cheeks like a lady's.—Not old enough to wear a sword, I say!—How did he get free of his mother's girdle?"

Such remarks as these attended the Popinjay, loudly enough to deepen the flush on his young face. Jasper stood squarely in front of him, devouring him with his eyes, which were not altogether unfriendly.

"You have ridden from Ruddiford?" he asked abruptly. "Your business with me—I can guess it—but sit you down first and eat with us. Here, Leonard, give your seat to this gentleman."

Leonard grunted, rising slowly from his place at the master's right hand. "Can the babe feed himself?" he muttered grimly in his beard.

"Sir, I thank you," said Richard to Jasper. "I have come to you on more errands than one." Jasper smiled slightly and nodded. Dick went on, not without a glance at the uninviting table, with its coarse lumps of bread, bowls of cabbage, piles of repulsive-looking fish, "Of your kindness, Sir, let me share my brother Lord Marlowe's dinner in his prison."

Jasper stared and hesitated.

"Young man," growled Leonard, "you will get no better fare there. Bethink you, it is Lent, and we do not pamper our prisoners. We be all under the rule of Holy Church and Doctor Curley, the Vicar."

"Peace, Leonard," Jasper said impatiently. "Come your ways, then, Master Marlowe."

With a rough hand on Dick's shoulder, he led him to the staircase at the back of the hall. They mounted the rugged steps by leaps and bounds together, while those in the hall laughed as they went.

"Another of the brood—If I were Jasper——" such words reached Dick's quick young ears, but did not frighten him. This man Tilney did not seem to him odious or cruel. In his heart Dick rather admired the spirit of the rejected suitor who, as he now understood (for Alice had told him of her brother's ambition), had so daringly laid hands on his rival. Harry must be freed, of course, and such a marriage for Meg must always have been impossible; but Jasper need not be punished, thought this young judge, quite forgetting how utterly the house of Marlowe was now in Jasper's power. He was Alice's brother, and that changed the universe. The wild freebooter, in Dick's eyes, was almost brother and friend.

They climbed the full height of the stairs, and reached a narrow gallery of rat-eaten boards, where the roof slanted on their heads, and two or three low doors were fastened with enormous bolts. There Jasper turned suddenly on his companion. "And why do you risk yourself under my roof, young Sir?" he said.

"For two reasons, Master Tilney,—if there be risk, which I do not see," Dick answered, looking him boldly in the eyes. "I have come to ask your sister's hand in marriage, and to demand my brother's freedom. You are not surprised by one request or the other. Where is your sister? I did not see her." Dick flushed, and his young eyes fell under Jasper's mocking stare.

"Truly," Jasper said, "you can do no less than ask her in marriage, as you were the means of sending her from Ruddiford Castle home to this dog-hole. Did you expect, then, to find her sitting among my Fellowship below?"

"Nay, I rejoiced to find her not there. But where is she?" Dick said, and his eyes wandered from one of those forbidding doors to another.

Jasper laughed. "She is safe," he said; "not under my roof, but not far away. No such hurry, my friend. You shall marry her"—with a tremendous oath—"you shall marry Alice Tilney, foolish sprig as you are, if my Lord your brother and my Lady your mother and all the powers of Lancaster and York say *No* together. I was debating how to catch you, Master Popinjay. You have put yourself into my hands, and if you be not in earnest, the worse for you. Alice, little fool, is mad on you, and swears she will have no other."

Dick smiled and shook his curls. "On my honour as a gentleman, I ask nothing better than to marry your sister, Master Tilney. I am of age to choose for myself."

"As to choice, you have none in the matter," Jasper answered coldly. "Now I leave you with my Lord

for a time. But remember, his freedom, which you ask, depends on himself. He will swear a certain thing to me, or he will die and rot in the garret here."

"Nothing against his honour?" said Dick grandly.

"That is for him to judge. He hath not listened to me; he may listen to you. Give him good counsel."

Jasper stooped to the bolts on Harry's door, drew them back and pushed it open. At his nod and sign Dick walked into the room, which the morning sun lighted pleasantly and warmed a little.

Harry Marlowe was standing in the window, basking in the sun, and the remains of his miserable meal were on the table. As the door opened and shut, he did not at first take the trouble to turn his head. But being conscious that somebody was in the room, somebody smitten suddenly with a shyness that amounted to awe, and a silent agony, at sight of the poor prisoner, he looked round and saw the Popinjay.

Thin, white, and worn, wrapped in a long furred gown that Jasper had brought him, the noble Baron who had ridden away in December from Swanlea was hardly to be recognized. His dark hair was touched with grey; the last few days had done that, the days since he had seen Lady Marlowe's train passing along the valley. He had known something of despair, as day after day, hour after hour, went by, and there seemed to be no search, no rescue for him. Terrible pictures had been with him day and night; he began to be tempted to distrust every one, even his step-mother's loyalty (for he knew he had offended her), even Meg's strength of mind, though never her love. Was there no way, none, out of this horrible labyrinth? None, it seemed, except by way of a promise he would not give, for the breaking of it would soil his honour for evermore.

"Dick, Dick!" Harry cried aloud; and as the boy ran forward and threw his arms about him, passionate tears of love and pity streaming from his eyes, the prisoner almost fainted from the shock of surprise

and joy. But in a few moments he recovered himself, and holding Dick at arm's length, asked him wildly if he came from Ruddiford.

"Ay, dear brother, from Ruddiford, and I bring a hundred messages from your lady-love," cried the Popinjay, swallowing his tears. "It was her wish to ride with me, to visit you and set you free—but we could not—a matter of a horse—and other things that I must tell you."

Harry laughed joyfully. "Dick, thou hast forgiven me, lad? Could mortal man resist? Didst think me disloyal? But you had not seen her, and you were a boy, it seems to me—a man now! whence the change?"

"Love, my brother, has wrought the change," said Dick, with a magnificent air. "Forgive you? Ay, and thank you, my Lord! But tell me, Harry, and quickly, what is this promise that Jasper Tilney asks of you, as the price of freedom?"

The prisoner's brow was clouded again. He let Dick's confession pass, at which the boy was slightly mortified. "A promise I will never give," he said. "Enough of me. What news from the war? What news of the Queen?"

"Why," Dick said, "I left Ruddiford rejoicing; good old Sir William mad with joy, crawling from his chair to proclaim it, trumpets sounding, bells ringing. Ask me for no more than the bare truth, for this is all I can tell you—the Queen victorious at St. Albans, the King free, Warwick fled. I do not know"—he was thinking of his mother, and debating—should he tell Harry all that would certainly displease him? He hesitated, and was silent.

Harry, flushed with joy once more, poured out questions, and Dick, while answering them as best as he could, went on thinking: "Poor Meg, sweet Meg! The Queen's man, now as ever! Would Alice take a heart so divided? As for me, I care little for either of their Roses; give me thy sweet love, Alice—"

The boy's sudden absence of mind might have puzzled Harry Marlowe a little, had his thoughts been free to notice it. But their talk was suddenly and strangely interrupted.

There were sounds at the end of the room, where another garret joined Harry's, and the crazy dividing wall, roughly panelled, sloped against the empty fireplace. There were blows on the wall, as of some heavy instrument. Two rats rushed up from their hole under the broken hearthstone, and raced along the floor; birds screamed and fluttered in the chimney. There was a cracking and rending of wood, a rattling fall of plaster. A square yard of rotten panelling smashed forward in a cloud of dust upon the floor, and while the two men stood gazing, a slight hooded figure, armed with an iron bar, dived through the wreckage and rose to its height before them. Alice Tilney, flushed and dishevelled, found herself in Dick Marlowe's arms.

"By all that's holy, my Popinjay! Who is this lady, and what does it all mean?"

Harry stood and gazed at the couple, while Dick devoured his new-found love with kisses, and Alice struggled vainly to escape from him. "For shame, Sir! for shame, let me go!" she said hurriedly. "How came you here?"

"Nay, how came *you* here, my pretty house-breaker!" cried Dick. "Are you lodged next door? By Heaven, your brother said you were not under this roof!"

"Peace, peace! I have a message to deliver."

She turned to Harry and made him a formal curtsy.

"My Lord Marlowe will not remember me," she said.

"Nay, fair lady, your pardon! I saw you at Ruddiford Castle on Christmas Eve. And I have heard your brother talk of you."

"You have a royal memory," Alice said, smiling. "Then give me credit for being a trusty messenger."

As she spoke, she held out Margaret's little letter. Harry bent his knee as he took it, and touched it with

his lips. As he turned away to the window, and slowly traced the trembling characters, Alice watched him till her smile died ; she drew in her breath with a quick sigh. It was with a pang of repentance that she thought of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Who had helped in the taking of this noble captive, if not she, bound then by a false loyalty and a love on which she now looked back with horror ! But now she had done her best on the other side. She shivered with terror and gladness, thinking how nearly Lady Marlowe had made her a messenger of death. The Popinjay little knew what was in his love's mind, as with childish jealousy he tried to win back her attention. He put his arm round her neck and gently turned her head, so that she must look at him and not at Harry, absorbed with Meg's letter. Then he kissed her again and again.

"Oh, what brought you to this wild place ?" she whispered, as soon as he would let her speak.

"Wild indeed ! and I have had no dinner," said Dick, laughing in careless delight. "His worship offered me a seat and a trencher down below, but I liked neither the food nor the company. I asked to dine with Harry, but lo ! nothing but bones. Explain now, how come you to be here ? Faith, I'm dying to know !"

"Tell your story first," she said : "then you shall have mine. I am mazed, Dick. Did your lady mother send you ? She knows then that he is here ?"

"'Tis Meg who told her. She came to her this very morning."

"She knew before that," Alice thought ; but she only murmured, "Go on," and Dick in a low voice told her of his adventure with Margaret, and how she desired that Lord Marlowe should not return to Ruddiford.

"She is right," Alice said. "But if he were set free, no such counsel would keep him from her."

"He must and will be set free," Dick said confidently. "What—can Jasper give you to me in marriage, and

keep my brother here like a rat in a hole? What is this he talks about promises? 'Tis not reasonable."

"Marriage!" Alice murmured, blushing scarlet. "'Tis true, last night, he was very angry, and swore he would catch you and marry us out of hand. But that cannot be——"

"Why not? Kiss me, love, and away with these sad looks. Now tell me quick, how did you reach us? I was ready with my dagger when you began to break in. I thought 'twas some rascal murderer on his way to Harry."

Alice laughed.

"Jasper would not have me in the house," she said, "and so he sent me to dwell with our old Vicar, Doctor Curley, and his housekeeper, a good old dame who was once on a time my nurse. Well, you must know, when Jasper and I were children, we used to climb from the priest's house to the church roof, and there is one place where the boughs of a yew-tree make a bridge between the church and the great ivy on our wall. This too we climbed, and many an hour we spent on the roof of the house while folks went calling round the fields for us, and many a nest we found among the chimneys. 'Tis not the first time I have scrambled down into this garret through the dormer window—the bars have fallen away, but a strong one lay ready to hand—and when I found my Lord was imprisoned here, with only lath and plaster between——"

"On my soul, you are a maid of spirit! I love you all the more. But we shall be married, hark you! Jasper's words to me—'You shall marry her,' says he, 'if all the powers say nay.'"

"What is this about marrying, Richard?" Lord Marlowe's voice, stern and strong for a prisoner, broke in suddenly on the lovers' talk. "Enough of this trifling, foolish boy!" he said. "Come and talk of graver things—of public affairs—but first, Master Tilney must and shall set me free now, for I will ride to Ruddiford, if the gates of hell are between. Tell

me first, Dick—You too, my friends, why do you look one upon another? There is some evil news, and you have not told me!”

“Listen, brother,” Dick said.

Harry flung himself into a chair, holding his hand over his heart, where Meg’s letter lay. Dick had just begun, “’Tis Mistress Roden’s desire that when you are free, you should ride straight to the Queen and not return to Ruddiford”—when Jasper burst the door roughly open and marched in, followed by two men carrying chains.

The horrible rattle turned Alice pale, and made young Dick’s eyes burn and his colour rise. Only Harry, slightly turning his head, looked at the men with an unmoved countenance.

Jasper’s wild eyes rested on the group, and he laughed coarsely, and swore an angry oath.

“’Tis time you two were wed,” he growled. “If ’twere worth while, sister, I would shut you up where this old jackdaw play of yours would be stopped with a vengeance. Watch your wife, Master Marlowe, or she may break walls and climb roofs too often to please you. Now, the church is ready, the priest is waiting, and in a fine fluster too, for the bride was in his charge, and he and his dame have lost her. No gay dressing, Alice—face and hands rusty, no repentance, Master Popinjay—’tis too late now. Fasten those chains to my Lord’s wrists; he shall witness the marriage, and after that we will make our bargain, he and I.”

To this both Harry and Dick had hasty answers to make. The younger, furious at the very sight of the chains, took them violently from the man who held them, and flung them across the room; the elder, without noticing the treatment intended for himself, said a few plain and angry words to Master Tilney as to forcing a marriage on his young brother without his mother’s consent or his own. The chains remained where Dick threw them; but Harry’s remonstrances

were wasted on the air. Jasper roughly linked his arm in his, and led his prisoner down the stairs, across the court and the churchyard, in at a low side-door of the church. Harry's head swam as he passed through the fresh cool air, and he leaned a little heavily on his enemy's arm.

The light struck down through the stately painted windows, and played in many colours on the armed crowd in the choir. The Fellowship were there in force, and their manners in the church were not much better than in the hall. The old priest with his white hair and rich vestments was ready to marry Alice Tilney, the only female descendant of the ancient house who had helped to build the church, whose tombs, freshly cut and coloured, adorned its chancel, to the pretty boy whose mother had meant him to be the Lord of Ruddiford.

It was the strangest wedding ever known at King's Hall, a haunt of bachelors where weddings were few. Doctor Curley muttered his part through as quickly as he might, far from satisfied with what he was doing, fearing some vengeance from the Marlowe family, but incapable of disobeying Master Tilney. By an odd inconsistency, he and the Fellowship were strong supporters of the Church, regular at mass and at confession. It was a queer old man who had the charge of these tough consciences ; but a less accommodating priest would not have remained a month in peace at King's Hall.

Jasper had promised the priest that Lord Marlowe should be there, and there he was ; pale, dishevelled, the strangest guest at a wedding, with angry eyes which yet softened when they fell on either the bridegroom or the bride. He and Jasper stood close together behind them, the nearest relations, the chief witnesses, and then came the motley throng, the population of King's Hall ; women of a far lower type than the men ; even dogs that crawled in behind their masters.

Suddenly, in the very middle of the service, a noise in the churchyard announced a fresh arrival. The south door opened and shut with a clang ; and a man came swiftly up the aisle, and pushed his way to the very front of the congregation. Alice started and looked round, at the very moment when her hand lay in Richard Marlowe's. Her eyes met those of Antonio.

The Fellowship knew him, and a low laugh ran round. Jasper gave him a furious glance, stretched out his hand and laid it on Lord Marlowe's shoulder. What was the Italian doing here ? Had he any designs on his prisoner ?

"Stay a moment, Sir Vicar," said Antonio. "What do you here all of you ? This is not a lawful marriage. Master Marlowe, you are not of an age to marry without my Lady your mother's consent. Think of her wrath, Sir ; think of your family."

"The chief of my family is here," said Dick. "Go on, Sir Priest. This fellow has no authority from my mother, for she knows nothing."

"Nay, Richard, the chief of your family is here by constraint," Harry began, yet half unwillingly ; but Antonio hurried on, even pressing close up to the bridegroom and laying on him a hand which he shook off angrily. "Sir, my Lady has sent me to search for you. I pray you, Sir, for her sake, and Mistress Alice knows——"

He looked her in the face with an extraordinary expression. She trembled and turned away. Had this man ever loved her, as she, foolish girl, had loved him ? Was it hatred, threatening, triumph—what was it that gleamed in his pale face, now that his own mischievous intrigue had reached an end she could not believe he had intended ? What would become of her, if he pushed himself between her and Richard now ? She shrank back with a slight cry. Her brother turned to Leonard, and signed to him to take his place beside Lord Marlowe. "Go on with your work, Father," he said, and grasped Antonio by the collar.

The Fellowship laughed aloud, as their leader strode down the church, dragging the Italian with him. Once more the heavy doors swung open, and Antonio was flung out upon the grass of the churchyard, with a parting kick to speed his departure. All this Jasper did without a word, then clanged the door back and bolted it in the faces of the men who had come with Antonio.

There was no further interruption to Alice Tilney's wedding

After the improvised wedding feast, at which Doctor Curley declined to attend, Jasper Tilney left his friends to carouse as they pleased, and led the young couple back to Lord Marlowe's room, to which he had been at once taken back, the hole made by Alice's entrance having already been roughly mended.

"And now for our bargain," he said, glancing with a mocking smile at Richard, who was absorbed in gazing at his bride. Alice herself looked more terrified than happy. "You two brothers," he said, "you two Marlowes, are in my power; but reason tells you I cannot afford to let you both go free. You, my Lord, may ride to the Queen, or to Ruddiford, or wherever you will; I shall bind you by no promise. I shall then keep this boy brother of yours and his new wife, snug and safe at King's Hall. And on the day that I hear of your Lordship's marriage with Mistress Margaret Roden, on that day shall my pretty hostage, this Popinjay, be hung by his neck to that beam yonder."

"Jasper! And you, my brother!" Alice screamed, while Dick, brave boy as he was, turned white to the lips.

"Pray to Lord Marlowe, not to me," her brother answered coldly. "If he makes his choice to stay with me, I will send you two off with an honourable escort,—back to your lady mother, if you please; but I counsel you, Popinjay, if you are a man, to go further. For I do suspect, in spite of St. Albans, that

the banner of York will shortly be flying on Ruddiford tower."

"How dare you say so, Master Tilney?" Harry Marlowe cried.

"I dare, my Lord, because my men have this very morning caught a messenger going from Lady Marlowe to Edward of York. Unluckily, there were two rascals, and one escaped. Will you have your arms, my Lord? My best horse is at your service."

"Nay, Harry, let me go; I will ride straight to the Queen," young Dick cried wildly.

Alice stood like a stone. Jasper laughed, and Harry looked from one to another. Liberty, the service of the Queen, the sight of Meg,—the possession of Meg, the death of the Popinjay,—to rot in prison for months, years, while this Jasper lived and the war went rolling on. Harry's choice was a hard one.

Chapter XIV

A HARD BARGAIN

WILD rumours were flying about the country. Some said the Red Rose was victorious everywhere, some that Queen Margaret's triumph would be short, and that England as a whole was on Edward of York's side. As to the rights and wrongs of the conflict, nobody knew much about them, and truly they were anything but clear. Men were led by personal reasons to throw in their lot with one cause or the other. If the House of York had a strictly legitimate title, that of Lancaster had been called to the throne by the national will in the person of Henry the Fourth.

Free of Jasper's heavy hand, and of all the restraints of King's Hall and Ruddiford, young Dick Marlowe and his bride rode south like two wild birds set free. Jasper had given them good horses and a small guard; Alice was a hardy girl and a fearless horsewoman, used from her childhood to hunting and hawking in the merry Midlands. Dick's notion was to ride straight to Swanlea, and to leave her there while he, with as many men as he could muster, hurried to place himself and his troop at Queen Margaret's service; thus, though a poor substitute for his elder brother, he could do Harry's will and serve the cause he believed in. In Dick's mind he owed life and love and all to Harry, who had chosen to stay in his dreary prison and to let the boy go free. It was the best way after all, since Jasper's conditions were so hard and horrible. And as luckily Jasper took the Red Rose side (a useless champion enough, as Harry did not

scruple to point out to him,) he was willing that Dick Marlowe should ride and fight where he pleased. One thing Jasper cared about, and one alone, he would marry Margaret Roden. And this from no such love as Lord Marlowe, or even humbler men, bore her, but from the passionate ambition to see himself, when Sir William died, master not only of a beautiful wife, but of Ruddiford Castle, and the great estates that joined his own, thus becoming the foremost gentleman in all the country-side.

Jasper was a strange creature, and this worldly ambition was the strongest point in his character. He was well pleased to find the occasion of marrying his sister Alice to Lord Marlowe's brother; it was an honourable alliance for the Tilneys, and it removed one of his likely rivals with Margaret. Dick, silly boy, was in love with Alice, but that was neither here nor there; his mother could easily have forced the match on, her mind being set upon it. Jasper plumed himself on a good day's work; and not the least pleasant part of it, to him, had been the flinging of Master Antonio out of the church door. He would have no cunning foreigners meddling with his family matters—not he! If he had known all that Antonio and Alice could have told him, the Tilney pride might have exacted worse punishment than a kick and a shaking.

Antonio lurked in the woods near King's Hall till he saw Dick Marlowe's little troop riding away southward. Then, not without a shiver at his heart, he went back to Ruddiford.

There had been a white heat of fury in the Castle that morning, when Lady Marlowe found her captives gone, and when she heard from Antonio, the unwilling witness, that her son had ridden off to King's Hall to follow Alice and find her brother. It was the more enraging that she had actually seen him go. Without troubling herself to return to Sir William, telling herself that he was in his dotage, she despatched Antonio in high haste to fetch Richard back. As to Harry,

she said nothing ; she was too angry to play a part. Neither, during those hours, did she hold any communication with Meg. Meeting her in the gallery, walking beside Sir Thomas Pye in earnest conversation, she passed them both without a glance, or any notice of their respectful salutations.

Meg looked up, anxious-eyed, into the thin and grave face of her old friend. He took her hand and pressed it, murmuring a few Latin words : "*Angelis suis mandavit de te : ut custodiant te in omnibus viis tuis.*" It was an assurance of protection against the woman passing there, her to whom Sir William Roden had confided his grandchild's future ; as such, it sounded strangely.

Antonio then, pale and strained, came back to the Castle and prepared to face the lioness robbed of her young. Although he had had no real love for her, Alice had been a pretty toy, a useful tool, and it was not without a qualm that he saw her removed from him for ever. At the same time he knew that Dick's marriage was all in his favour, defeating Lady Marlowe's intention and spoiling her plan ; and it was with real relief that he had seen the bridal troop ride away south, not north. He did not want those two at Ruddiford. Whatever my Lady chose to do for the sake of herself and the White Rose (and he suspected what he hardly dared think), any such matter, in which she might force his compliance, would be easier with Dick and Alice away. And he saw himself as Meg's one resource, the only man in the Castle who had both a heart to love her and a brain to defend her. It looked as if Jasper meant to keep Lord Marlowe in safe durance,—so much the better for Antonio. He could almost forgive the brutal squire his ill-treatment, with the thought that he was playing his game for him. But yet, with all his hopes, Antonio trembled as he entered Lady Marlowe's presence.

He told her all he had seen. She listened, very pale and quiet, biting her lips, pressing her nails into

the palms of her hands. She paced the room without a word, while he waited, and watched her curiously, admiringly, with courage and fear oddly mixed together. It seemed to him that the crisis of his life was upon him. This desperate woman might drag him to destruction ; no, he defied her in his heart ; she should rather be his stepping-stone to the height of his desire.

She came back and sat in her chair, while he knelt on her footstool. She looked at him, frowning, as if for the moment it was difficult to collect her thoughts. At last she said : “ I would I were rid of that Jasper Tilney. He mocks at my counsel and stands in my way.”

“ What has he done against your ladyship’s counsel ? ” said Antonio surprised.

“ It concerned his prisoner,” she said. “ One of these days, I doubt, he will set him free to spoil all my designs for Ruddiford.”

“ And your counsel ? ” Antonio murmured.

“ Any but a fool,” she said, “ would have understood and followed it. I sent him a written word by that sister of his,—whom I wish I had touched with my little dagger ! The girl delivered it, I suppose—she had no reason to think—and it was sealed.”

Had Alice delivered it ? Antonio wondered, but he said : “ I cannot say ; Jasper Tilney is a strange man.”

“ He may obey it yet,” Lady Marlowe said, “ now that Richard is safe away.” She ground her teeth and struck her clenched fist on her knee. “ Antonio, I fear that Tilney,” she said, “ and all these jealous old greybeards here ; I fear them all ; the priest worse than any, and that cursed little leech who would not sell you the ratsbane. I owe him for his horse, ay, a great sum ; but, listen,”—she bent towards him with a terrible look—“ there is one, the greatest obstacle of all. Were he away—in the confusion—with my appointed guardianship—and the Yorkist troops will not be long in coming—yet who knows ? The Queen’s

troops may be before them. Antonio, I must possess the Castle. If not by fair means,—Dick's marriage with her—then, I swear, by foul means. Yet the Rose is white enough,—a shower will wash off the old, pale stain." She laughed. "Ruddiford must be for York," she said. "I will not rest till the banner of York waves on the tower,—and you will help me, Antonio?"

Their eyes met, saying things that the honest air of old Ruddiford would hardly have borne to hear. Gazing steadily at her, he slowly shook his head.

"Why do you look upon me so?" she said.

"You would have me compass the death of my master,—my old master—father and friend?" he whispered under his breath.

"Who is faithful to a master in these days?" murmured Isabel. "Father, mother against son, husband against wife, sister against brother! Father, you say, and friend? 'Twas he himself told me of your birth,—or no birth—a thing left in the gutter to be picked up by a passer-by. A pretty father and friend, to tell such a tale of the beautiful youth who has served him so long and well. Come," she went on, as she saw him wince, "is it for Mistress Margaret's sake you hesitate? She will soon be comforted. I shall find her a husband in the ranks of York. I am her guardian, I will answer for her." She smiled maliciously.

Antonio leaped to his feet and withdrew from her a few paces. Her eyes slowly followed him.

"Ratsbane, Antonio mine;" she said, or breathed, so that he only just caught the words. "If the apothecary refused it to you, it was that he mistrusted you; take it from him by force. Mix it in the food, I will tell thee how——"

Again Antonio shook his head. "If I did, Simon Toste would know, he would betray me," he said. He caught his breath, staring at her wildly.

"By my faith," she said, "you are more fool than knave. I must find a better instrument. Or do you make this pother for your own advantage? Well,

you shall have money and jewels, and you shall rule Ruddiford under me, and grind what you can out of townspeople and tenants. You shall run free ; I will drive my willing horse with a loose rein. As to the greybeards, they shall not trouble us long. It may be well, when you fetch the ratsbane, to leave the vile apothecary dead on his own hearth-stone."

"Madam, madam, I am not a murderer !" Antonio whispered, turning ghastly pale.

"No, you are a coward," she said. "You were not afraid to set a gang upon Lord Marlowe, who might have killed him. But when it is a matter of using your own hands, for your own advantage and mine—'Madam, he is my friend'—'Madam, he would betray me'—'Madam, I am not a murderer.' " She mocked him. "By all that's holy, wretched boy, you will kill my enemies, or be killed."

The threat seemed manifestly false, and called back his courage. He was himself surprised that it had failed him for a moment, and now he laughed in her face. "Ay, kill me, Madam," he said ; "and then work out your plans single-handed. I will prove to you that I am no coward, and more knave than fool." He laughed again. "I'll put a price on my fidelity. This right hand is yours, to do your bidding ; I will destroy your enemies and give you Ruddiford, but not for money or jewels or power, Madam, though I will have those thrown into my bargain. I will have the greatest prize of all, without whom the world to me is nothing." His voice softened and his eyes burned. "You cannot now marry Mistress Roden to your son ; marry her to me !"

"To you, dog !" Lady Marlowe screamed, and laughed shrilly. "And you talk, hypocrite, of your father and friend ? Would not such an insult be worse to him than a thousand of the deaths I shall give him ? A nameless beggar's brat from the streets of Naples !"

"Men have carved their own fortunes before now,

Madam," Antonio said calmly. "And it was but yesterday, when you charged me with this despairing love of mine, that you called it a pretty ambition. God knows, if I have such a prize from your hand, I shall have earned it hardly. And consider, Ruddiford will be yours, York's, and I shall owe you more, far more, than to those who have tended me and brought me up here. I shall owe you the satisfaction my life craves for."

"Ha!" Isabel looked him in the face, scornful and laughing, "Ha, Sir Antonio! a knighthood from King Edward, fourth of the name—that will be your worship's next desire. And I counsel you to bear your wife's name and arms, since you have none of your own. What would she say, think you, to this sweet bargain,—a low-born knave for a husband, his hands stained with her grandfather's blood?"

"Her consent need not be asked," said Antonio; his eyes fell for an instant, and he smiled. "As a child she loved me well enough," he said; "she shall love me again."

"Beautiful as an angel of Satan," Lady Marlowe said, "there are women, Antonio, who might love you indeed, in a sort, forgetting alike your birth and your character. There are those who would love you as a plaything, as a pet animal, while others might be caught by your devilish cleverness, as in a net. But you know, and I know, that Margaret Roden is not one of these. She would hate you eternally; your touch would be death to her. And remember, Lord Marlowe lives. So long as he is captive, you might live and thrive—but after——"

Antonio shrugged his shoulders, and tossed his dark head. "Madam, even these risks do not terrify me."

"Silence, beast of the earth!" she said. "They are knocking without,—listen!"

There was indeed a distant sound in the outer gallery. It was now twilight; across the farther window of the room, half shadowed with ivy, a great owl sailed, hoot-

ing long and loud. It was seldom that his voice was heard at such an hour, so near the walls or when the folk of the Castle were still awake and moving. For a moment there was terror in both faces, as the wretches looked upon each other.

"'Fore God, you are making a sick child of me, with those rolling eyes of yours!" cried Isabel. "Go, open the door."

"Is it a bargain, Madam?" Antonio hissed, leaning towards her.

"I make no bargains with a slave," she said coldly. "I ask nothing of you, miserable boy; I command. Bring me ratsbane, or you die. Leave the rest to me; take my counsel, and forget your madness. Ah!" as the knocking became louder. "Will you go?"

A servant brought a message from Sir William Roden, begging Lady Marlowe to honour him with her presence. She immediately proceeded to his room above the hall, while Antonio, darting round by the galleries, slipped in by another way and waited behind the hangings. He would not go with her openly, though indeed his master had desired him to wait upon her ladyship, paying her all honour and carrying out her wishes. Sir William had known of the mission to King's Hall in pursuit of Master Richard and of its failure; he now desired to express his anger and commiseration. It touched his honour that young Marlowe should have fled from his house and married against his mother's will. He was very angry with Mistress Alice for leading the young fellow so astray, and talked bravely of sharp punishment for the wild brother who had forced on the marriage. And this, he now knew, was only one of Jasper Tilney's crimes. There was indeed a double, treble apology due to Lady Marlowe. His good old soul was troubled within him, for he fancied that in the interview with her ladyship that morning he had been hardly courteous or kind. No danger indeed,

that Dick, the rascal, would be forced as a husband on his sweet Meg.

Isabel, fierce-eyed but stately, and far more self-controlled than in the morning's visit, sat and faced Sir William and those about him. There was a mocking twist of her handsome mouth, for the knight's suit was characteristic.

Margaret stood in her old place, the place where Harry had seen her and asked her in marriage, close to her grandfather's shoulder with her hand resting there. Behind her, to her right, the Vicar was sitting, and on each side of him stood the brothers, the faithful allies, Timothy and Simon. Little Simon's round face was like a harvest moon, red and shining as the firelight played on it ; he grinned, almost in enjoyment of the imbroglio that he had helped to make, through no fault of his own. Timothy's lanthorn jaws were pulled to their longest : he felt the loss of a good horse, never likely to return from King's Hall, nor, he feared, to be paid for ; and he dreaded that Lady Marlowe's wrath might fall on the wrong heads. Timothy was a rebel at heart : he did not love the great of the earth, nor their selfish tyranny ; and now, gazing spell-bound at the Baroness, he repeated to himself,—“ A wicked woman ! Yea, a wicked woman ! ”

Sir William was far more himself than in the morning, when the joyful news from St. Albans had almost overset his wits. He now spoke to Lady Marlowe like a courteous old friend, and she received his apologies and condolences graciously, though coldly. As to her son, there was no more to be said ; he had offended her past forgiveness. Truly, she was glad that the woman he had thought fit to marry was of fair descent, but this did not alter the fact ; it was a disobedient, scandalous marriage, and those who had brought it about might one day answer for it : a flash from her ladyship's eyes reached poor Simon, and his smile died away. This last abominable freak

made the cup of Master Tilney's evil doings run over. He was a kidnapper in every sense.

Then her ladyship bent suddenly towards Margaret, who was watching her in white anxiety. 'Your message, child,—you sent a message—but my Lord Marlowe is not yet free. This Jasper holds his prisoner tight, it seems.'

"He is not yet free," Meg answered, hardly knowing her own voice, so hollow was it, so fearful. "You know all, Madam; you know that Richard and Alice are gone away, but he—he is there still. And my grandfather——"

"Yes, yes," Lady Marlowe said. Suddenly, while that row of eyes, Sir William's alone friendly, Meg's full of doubt and question, looked upon her, the cloud seemed to pass from her brow and her face was full of hope and eagerness. "What do we, Sir William?" she said, "What force or guile will make this brigand give up his prey?"

"It shall be force, Madam," the old man said; "I am not a lover of guile. Had I known sooner where to find my Lord, I would have burnt King's Hall to the ground, to have him out of his prison; he is too noble for such handling. Now, Meg, thy letter."

Isabel drew a sharp breath. Antonio strained eyes and ears from his hiding-place. Meg came forward a pace, drawing a paper from her bosom. "This," she said, "was given by Richard to a poor peasant in the fields, who brought it to me but now." She read the letter aloud, trembling, while Isabel's eyes devoured it and her.

"My dear and fair lady, keep yourself in patience, holding Ruddiford for the Red Rose. Necessity and honour have me fast, but a brighter day will dawn for thy Harry."

"Verily, and the sooner the better!" cried Lady Marlowe, with the strangest heartiness. "Honour—

what means he? some mad promise he has given—why, Meg, we must break it for him. Sir William, this very night we must have him free.”

As she spoke, she smiled on Meg and beckoned her. This, with some undefinable difference, was the Lady Marlowe who had sat in the tower-room twenty-four hours before. But Meg, if she saw the sign, did not obey it. Hiding her letter away once more, she stepped back to her old place, watchful as ever as she gazed upon my Lady.

“I told thee, Meg,” Sir William murmured, and his old hand clasped hers. “Ay, my Lady! The men are now arming—they shall start at moonrise—a strong troop of my best men, with Black Andrew to lead them—and a black welcome he will have, if he returns without my Lord. Then, then, it seems to me, with your goodwill, we too may have a wedding. Lord Marlowe may be in haste to join the Queen, but first I will give him what he asked; he shall have my Meg, and so the future of Ruddiford shall be sure. You will receive her as a daughter, Madam, though not after your first intention.”

A smile touched Meg's lips, but she moved her head a little, while her hand pressed the old man's shoulder and her eyes never left Lady Marlowe. As for her, she looked upon the floor, and seemed to hesitate for a moment; then she drew herself once more upright. “Truly, Sir William, you console me in my misfortune,” she said almost sweetly. “I shall then perform my promise to Margaret, and she will be my true and loving daughter. Send a strong force, I beseech you; we can no longer live under Master Tilney's rule. If by a happy accident the world were rid of him,—but I will not be revengeful. Only do not risk failure; send every man your worship can spare.”

“Would it be more fitting,” Simon Toste squeaked out suddenly, “if my Lady Baroness's own men were sent to rescue their own master?”

But Sir William would not hear of this. It was not necessary for her ladyship to crush poor Simon; he did it himself. He felt that Ruddiford was responsible for Lord Marlowe's capture; Ruddiford must set him free. And later, when the conference had broken up, Meg herself reproached Simon with her usual severity. "Master Toste, you are a foolish meddler," she said. "My Lady's men shall neither see him nor touch him. I shall write him a letter that Black Andrew shall give him; and he shall take what men he chooses, and ride away to the Queen. I tell you, I will not have him here at Ruddiford."

"What, mistress? Not to marry you?" Simon cried.

"I do not trust her," Meg whispered in his ear. "She loves him not, I tell you. Hast so soon forgotten my warning, Simon?"

"Why," cried the apothecary, "'twas your very warning that made me say it! All our men away, all her men here——"

"Peace, you are too fearful. Impossible,—how could she!" and Meg flew to write her letter.

Antonio was again with Lady Marlow, receiving her commands.

Chapter XV

DOGS, OWLS AND TREASON

AS the moon rose that evening over the dim and misty country, Black Andrew and his troop left Ruddiford on their way to rescue the prisoner of King's Hall. He was a sturdy fellow, who by courage and merit had won his place as Sir William's most trusted follower. He was a Ruddiford man, and his forefathers for generations had served and fought for the Rodens. He was a man of original mind and sharp tongue. Being proved wrong in his conclusions as to the fates of Lord Marlowe and his men, he now said openly that Jasper Tilney, in capturing my Lord, had proved himself a better man than any one thought him. The whole Marlowe brood was odious to Black Andrew. He hated my Lady with her cold face and proud airs ; he laughed at the Popinjay and marvelled at Mistress Alice ; he despised Antonio all the more for the service he paid them.

Before Black Andrew started with his little train of archers and pike-men, he had a hurried word with Mistress Margaret, for whom, with most of Ruddiford, he would have laid down his life willingly. He stood before her, tall, square, and strong, his rough dark hair curling under his steel cap, his swarthy skin reddening with pleasure at her trust in him. He took the letter she gave him for Lord Marlowe, and stowed it away safely. He understood from her that if Lord Marlowe so willed it, he was to give him his horses and his best men, that he might ride away southward.

"What, not home to Ruddiford for the wedding ?" Black Andrew thought and wrinkled his brow. Aloud he said : "That will scarce be my Lord's will, Madam ; but if it be, trust Andrew. Not a finger will I stretch to lead him hither."

Meg smiled as she turned away. "Do my will, Andrew," she said.

When the men had tramped and clattered over the bridge, all was quiet in the castle. Lady Marlowe remained in her own apartments. Meg returned to her grandfather, and stayed with him while night fell. The three worthies sat there again, gossiping quietly round the fire. The Vicar, Simon, and Timothy talked among themselves of all these strange events and sudden discoveries, finding much to discuss, to wonder at, and to blame. They tried to draw Meg into their talk, but she would scarcely speak, seeming absorbed in her own thoughts. She sat on a low stool by her grandfather, resting her head against his knee, his hand lying on her hair; her eyes, deep in dreams, studied the fire, as if there were a face, even a voice, in the flaming logs for her.

"Ah," Simon sighed under his breath, "'twas an ill day for Ruddiford when that crazy Lord came hither."

Timothy jogged him. "Vex her not;" he whispered. Simon shook his head and was silent, staring at the girl.

At first Sir William asked many questions and entered into their talk, which chiefly concerned Jasper Tilney and his Fellowship, and the wild acts by which they had made themselves a terror to the country-side. He would, at last, be punished for his long career of insolence. Sir William's plan was to take possession of King's Hall, to imprison some of the marauders at Ruddiford, to send Jasper himself, with Leonard and one or two of the foremost, in chains to Queen Margaret. He must answer to her for his treatment of her faithful servant, Lord Marlowe. As he was on the right side Her Highness might pardon him, and set him to some better work than catching and keeping his private rivals. But Sir William added that he should consult with Lord Marlowe, whom he now considered as his own son, as to the punishment of his enemy.

So they went on debating, the worthies being inclined to think that, bad as Jasper was, there existed worse men and more dangerous. His sins, at least, went before to judgment ; evil he might be, but the wolf did not disguise himself.

After a time Sir William became drowsy ; the many excitements of the day had been too much for his old brain, and he dozed away, breathing heavily, his pale brow and fine white head drooping, his beard streaming down over his breast.

The three friends went on talking with lowered voices, and Meg remained motionless, her grandfather's hand still resting on her hair. She too might have been sleeping, but her eyes were wide open as they dreamed upon the fire.

Outside, the castle was very still. The only sounds to be heard were not cheering ones ; the owls hooted and screeched about the towers in the rising moonlight, as if an evil spirit was troubling them, and the dogs in the yard low down, catching their complaint of restlessness, howled as if the place was full of spectres, as if devils and witches might be plainly seen, flapping with black wings and fiery eyes and broomsticks across the dim pale sky. The lads in charge of the dogs went trembling, with long whips, to lash them into silence, but they only howled all the more ; and the lads rubbed their eyes and crawled sleepily back to their mattresses, for Ruddiford was heavy with weariness after the rejoicings of the morning, and the best men, with Andrew at their head, were all away.

Among the shadows of the sleepy empty castle, along the unguarded ramparts and the bridge, under the archways of the gates, Lady Marlowe's own men crept to take up the posts that Sir William's men had left almost empty. There were not many of these Swanlea men, but they were a picked band, generously paid by her ladyship, whom they served partly for profit, partly from fear. The two men who had escaped in the rout of Lord Marlowe's troop were

among them. They laid hands on such weak Rufford fellows as were pretending to watch the castle while the men-at-arms were away ; old warders past their work, young boys half asleep and frightened : they tied their arms and legs, gagged them, and stowed them away behind any door that came nearest. All this they did as silently as possible, under the orders of Antonio, who, when a new watch was set at every gate and on the tower, all ways carelessly open to town or river being stopped or guarded, went with the keys of the castle to Lady Marlowe's room.

He found her sitting alone by the fire. She took the great keys upon her velvet lap, counting and fingering them. The young man stood and looked at her steadily, at first with a smile, which vanished suddenly away when she lifted her eyes from the heap of iron. "And these are all ?" she said.

"All, Madam," said Antonio. But he lied, for one small key lay safe in his own pocket. It was that of a door near Margaret's tower, reached by a narrow flight of steps from the ramparts, and leading out upon the river above the castle mill. Here were a weir and a sluice, by which a man could cross the water, except in time of flood, and get away into the country. Lady Marlowe might hold the castle and its inmates in the hollow of her hand ; she might, and probably would, keep it till the Duke of York sent a band to take possession ; but against his will she would not keep Antonio.

"You have done well, so far," she said. "Tomorrow, when we have time, those dogs shall be stabbed or strangled, and the owls shall be shot. One would say bird and brute knew the fate that was falling on the Rodens. And the ratsbane ? But I have changed my mind ; there is not time, and the old men are still there, are they not ?"

"I looked in but now," Antonio said. "They are there, still chattering among themselves, and—he is sleeping in his chair."

"Good. They will not leave the castle to-night. You have given orders?"

"I have, Madam."

"You might have gone to the shop and searched it for poisons. But no, it is too late, and you must not go outside the walls. There are other means"—she started up suddenly, and all the keys fell clattering on the floor.

"Take them up," she said impatiently. "Carry them into the bedchamber, fling them into the great wardrobe. No gate shall be opened till the banner of York comes in. So,—now get you back,—watch them all. If Mistress Roden lingers long, tell her to come to me, that I wait here for her greeting. Let her leave the others there. And you, when they are gone, warn me; then watch your master till he wakes, or till I come."

Antonio bowed low and left her.

Not many minutes later, Margaret was conscious of a sound in the room, outside the small circle round the fire. She looked round, and in the dimness saw Antonio. It seemed to her, dazzled with long gazing at the fire, that the candles on the table burned strangely pale and blue. "What do you there?" she murmured impatiently, and at the same instant Simon Toste glanced sharply round.

"Ah, Master Tony, how about the ratsbane?" he said. "I doubt, young man, you wanted it for something bigger than rats. Dame Kate tells me they are none so plentiful."

Antonio's fingers stole to his dagger, while he smiled on the old man. "What game, then, do you accuse me of chasing, Master Simon?"

"Faith, I scarcely know," Simon answered. "Unless you yourself, tired of this life, in which no man has his deserts——"

"Peace, Simon, you will wake Sir William"—"This is a foolish argument"—came from Sir Thomas and Timothy.

Antonio, with a slight laugh, noticed them no longer ; but Simon's round eyes still studied him with unfriendly curiosity.

On hearing Lady Marlowe's message, Margaret rose instantly, and softly moved her grandfather's hand to the arm of his chair. As she did so, she touched it for an instant with her lips ; the old hand was cold, in spite of a furred gown and blazing fire. Sir William slept on, unconscious of that soft good-night, unconscious that the treasured child was leaving him, unconscious that his castle was no longer his own, that the dogs and the owls were singing together the dirge of the last Roden, that strange men were guarding the gates, waiting only for the morning to pull down the yellow banner and hoist the standard of York. Had he known, Lady Marlowe would have found her work none so easy ; the old hero of Agincourt would have called in the men of the town and would have struck a blow for the Red Rose before his strength quite failed him. Isabel had guessed as much, and could scarcely yet believe how sleep and treason had become her allies, one as much as the other.

Meg wished the three worthies a friendly good-night, bowed her head for the Vicar's blessing, and went out upon the wide staircase, silently attended by Antonio. She did not go down into the hall, but turned into the gallery which led by twisted ways to Lady Marlowe's lodging. Seeing that the Italian was following her, she turned her head slightly towards him and said : " I need you not, Antonio. My grandfather will be waking ; go back to him."

Without answering, he came close up to her, fell on one knee and laid his hand upon her dress. She looked down upon him frowning. " You mistrust me," he said. " You have forgotten the love you once bore to your old playfellow,—why is this ? "

" My old playfellow's love," Meg answered, " I think it has failed me. I believe that since Christmas Day my friend has been my enemy. I do not forget,

but how can I trust? If I am unjust to you, Antonio——”

“You are unjust,” he said. “Foolish you are, and ignorant. Little you know me, or the cause of what I do. For a kind word from you, Meg, my playfellow, I would yet do much; yes, I would save all you love. Oh angel, oh beauty! who loves you as I do? They do not know what it is, pale, cold, half-hearted; while I could rise to heights of heaven or plunge to depths of hell for you. Would any prison hold me from you? Would any walls and gates keep me out,—my lady, my saint, whom I worship?”

He caught her hand, and laid his hot brow upon it. For the moment she did not repulse him, for the childish days came back, the days before Alice was sent for, before the wisdom of the old men had taken away her beautiful Italian toy. He lifted his head and went on speaking hurriedly. “It is not all English blood, thick and cold, in your veins, Meg. Fire will to fire, and you and I, Italy is our mother. If we could fly to Italy——”

He kissed her hand passionately, and she snatched it from him. “Antonio! You are mad,” she said, shuddering. “You know not what you are saying.”

“I know,” he said, and laughed; “just as you know, or guess, what I have done.”

“You are a madman,” she repeated, stepping back from him.

“No, sweet lady, I am a man in his senses,” Antonio said. “Listen, listen a moment. I could do great things to-night for love of you. Ah, your love! If you will not give it me to-night, you will repent, I tell you. There is danger abroad; I hold lives in my hand; give me your love, and they shall be safe.”

She shrank back again, looking down upon him coldly and scornfully, yet with a secret terror. His threats, of course, must be meant for Harry Marlowe. There must be some plot to destroy him, when, as they

expected, he came to Ruddiford in the morning. She half believed that he was safe, that he would obey her counsel, her entreaty, and ride away to his Queen ; yet deep in the girl's heart was the knowledge that if he did this, he would hardly be the Harry to whom her love was given. Not that she would love him less, or trust him less, but the love would have its touch of pain. She would know that he did not long for her presence as she for his. The first flight of the freed bird should be to her ; and sometimes she believed that it would and must be so. She did so at this moment, with Antonio kneeling at her feet, breathing prayers that she hardly understood and hated altogether. However, risk or no risk, he could only be answered in one way. With a scornful movement of her head she turned to leave him. "You must know that you ask impossibilities," she said. "Go, be gone ! I do not believe in your power ; I despise your threats."

She was flying, but he followed her, suddenly reading her thoughts. "Meg, sweet mistress, you do not read me right," he muttered hastily. "I speak of to-night, not to-morrow,—to-night, to-night, Meg." For a moment his quick breathing and hurried steps kept pace with hers, as they ran along the gallery. Again he tried to snatch her hand. "Stay, stay, understand me ; am I friend or enemy ? Call me friend, and I will save,—listen,—trust me ! You will not ? Then things may take their course for me ; but my turn will come, fair lady——" He stopped and turned back suddenly.

She fled like a young deer along the dark ways, lit only by the glimmering moonlight through barred windows here and there. She did not slacken her pace, even when she knew he was no longer pursuing her, but fled on to Lady Marlowe's lodging, which seemed, at least, like a safe refuge from Antonio. How terribly right my Lady had been ! How well she had read his character ! Yet Meg felt that she

could not tell her of those minutes in the gallery, and waited at her door till the wild beating of her heart was quieted.

Antonio was quickly himself again. "So," he muttered, "you know me now,—and I will have you in the end, if I must turn her ladyship's dagger on herself. A husband from the ranks of York? Ah, it were better to have promised her to me, and so you shall find, Lady Isabel! But to-night you must do your will. I would have saved him for a kiss; 'tis thou, Meg, not I or she, who is guilty to-night."

His whirling thoughts did not delay the swift feet that hurried back to Sir William, who still slept peacefully on, while the three old friends sat in the same places, talking in under-tones; it seemed as if they did not wish to leave the castle.

Antonio came and stood in the midst, his mouth smiling upon them, while his eyes were more mysterious than ever. Simon Toste looked on him with obstinate disfavour. For a minute or two the three were silent, then Sir Thomas Pye rose slowly to his slender height, saying: "Well, masters, 'tis time for home and bed. Pity to rouse his worship to bid us good-night; let him sleep as long as he can; all the joyful news of to-day has wearied him. We must e'en leave him to your care, Antonio."

"Ay, Sir Vicar," the young man said, and nodded, with a glance at his sleeping master. "It is late, as you say."

"How beautiful he is in sleep!" murmured little Simon, and went on tip-toe nearer to Sir William's chair. "Mark you the firm, pink flesh? If it were not for this cursed pain and stiffness, he would be a younger man than you or me, Timothy. He may live a dozen years yet in my opinion."

"God grant it!" said Sir Thomas Pye.

"Why do the dogs howl and the owls screech?" whispered Timothy. "One would say some heavy misfortune was coming on the house."

“Have no such cowardly fears; ’tis the moon,” Sir Thomas said. “The house is in the care of God and His Saints, friend Timothy.”

He made the sign of the cross over the sleeping man, who seemed to smile, and then walked from the room, followed by the two brothers, and secretly, at a longer distance, by Antonio.

As the three friends approached the town gate of the castle, they had to pass a flight of dark and narrow steps which led down to the iron-grated door of the dungeon under the keep. It was long since any one had been confined there, for Sir William’s kindly rule was satisfied with less dreary prisons for those who offended him. So long was it that Antonio could not remember seeing any captive dragged down the stairway to those depths, wet, black, noisome, where men had once been chained to rings in the wall and left to live or die as they might on the miserable food thrust in through a grating.

On this night the dungeon door was open, and half a dozen of Lady Marlowe’s strongest men were waiting on the stairs. As the three worthies came near, these men suddenly stepped up into the moonlight and attacked them, two to one.

They struggled hard, crying, “Treason! treachery! help!” but being men of peace and far from young or very muscular, they were soon overpowered. Antonio came near enough to see them, priest, lawyer and apothecary, pulled and pushed head-foremost down the black steps of the dungeon. Above the clamour of voices he heard the rattle of chains, and began to laugh as he stood there, laughing on till he held his sides and his eyes were streaming. He waited till he heard the clang of the iron door, and the men’s feet returning up the stairs, while smothered in the heavy walls he could still hear Simon crying shrilly—“Help! Murder! Treason! Ah! the villains, who has set you on? He and you shall pay for this!”

Antonio dried his eyes, and slipped away to my Lady.

Chapter XVI

A DREAM OF AGINCOURT

AT Meg's low knocking Lady Marlowe called to her to enter. She was standing between two candles at the far end of the room, bending over something that she seemed to examine very closely. For a moment, before she plunged this thing into hiding under the heavy folds of her gown, the light flashed on steel. But Meg, strangely agitated, hardly noticed this ; if she had, in spite of a certain distrust of Isabel, she would have known it was nothing marvellous that such a woman should carry a weapon for self-defence.

Even now, the girl half reproached herself that it was impossible to keep loyalty both to her grandfather and to Lady Marlowe. Ruddiford could never be for York, as her ladyship wished ; Meg herself, with him, must hold it for the Red Rose. There seemed no great danger ; the Queen was victorious. When her ladyship found that Harry did not return, putting himself, the Queen's man into her power, she would surely leave the castle. If, in spite of Meg's entreaty, he did come, the danger must be run. Lady Marlowe, feigning or not, had in words consented to the marriage. It must take place instantly ; Harry, master of Ruddiford, must act for Sir William ; he would know how to handle these difficult matters, far better than a girl, who could only see her way from one moment to another. Sometimes Meg's heart failed her to think that she had done her best to keep her lover away. Could she and the good men of Ruddiford hold the place, giving no loophole for Lady Marlowe's designs ? Sir Thomas

the Vicar thought so, and had spoken very fearlessly ; all the men were devoted to Sir William. Meg swung back to the thought of Harry, safer free and away.

Now, as she came into the room and closed the door, the woman she doubted came to meet her smiling, and took both the girl's hands as she bent respectfully before her. "So, Mistress Meg," she said, and went on with words that were well enough, though the tone of her voice was odd and hollow, and her eyes studied Meg's face till it flushed and paled again. "You are to have your way, it seems," she said. "The bridegroom will be here, and quickly ; a brighter day will not be long in dawning for your Harry. Verily, you have taught him pretty language !"

Meg's eyes fell, and she smiled faintly. Lady Marlowe, holding her wrists, still watched her curiously ; then suddenly she let her go, but only to hold her more closely, pressing hands and arms tightly round the slight figure, feeling and discovering something that startled her in the hurried pulses, the eyes still wild with some strange experience. "Meg," she said, "you noble child, what is it that disturbs you ? Remember, my daughter, I claim your confidence. You will not tell me ? I know your courage, but you have felt some great alarm. You cannot deceive me ; what are you hiding from me ? The truth—instantly !"

"Nothing, nothing, Madam," Meg murmured hastily, and tried to withdraw herself from the clasp that only became tighter. Then, shivering suddenly from head to foot, she went on : "There is something terrible in this night, though 'tis still and the moon is shining I would rather the wind blew. Master Toste said that misfortune was upon us—the dogs, the screech-owls, you hear them—but Sir Thomas told him we were under the protection of God. 'Tis true, I know, but yet——"

"Meg," said Isabel, "you are deceiving me. Though a girl, you have the blood of heroes——" she stopped

suddenly. "No," she continued, "none of these foolish noises, or words of silly old men, have frightened you."

"I am not frightened, Madam."

"Then you are angry, agitated, wild. There, why do you start, and look at the door?"

"I thought one had followed me——"

"Ah! I knew well. Who is it that you fear? In this room you are safe from English or foreign enemy, or friend, or lover. So, the Italian gave not only my message, but his own? I guessed it from your look, my maiden, as you came in at the door. Insolent lackey! He shall suffer, when I have done with him. And the black-eyed boy dared to tell you of his love, Margaret?"

The girl lifted her head proudly. "You warned me, Madam, only yesterday," she said. "You were not wrong. But not only did he tell me that, he also threatened me. He said that danger lay in wait for those I loved, but he would save them, if—Madam, what could he mean?"

Lady Marlowe turned white to the lips, and laughed a little. "What could he mean?" she repeated. "You can answer that question as well as I. Have you answered it?"

Meg looked down, and slowly shook her head. Lady Marlowe, staring at her, laughed again, but there was a light in her eyes, and lines about her mouth, that boded ill for Antonio. "So, slave, 'tis war to the death!" she said in her heart. Aloud, in a voice wonderfully calm, she told Meg to forget the wretch's presumption. As for his threats, they were to be treated as empty air. "To-morrow, child," she said, smiling, "you will have your own champion, and this miserable playfellow of yours, why, we will send him back to Italy. I love not these transplanted creatures."

"But my grandfather loves him," Meg said, and shivered again.

Lady Marlowe turned quickly away. "He is unworthy," she said. Then she stood still, listening a moment intently. To her quick senses, now sharpened to the utmost, the sound of a distant door announced the coming of Antonio. "See here, Meg," she said. "I must make sure that you are safe, that your people are in waiting; I will see to it myself; you shall not be troubled by that serpent again." She opened the door of a little oratory on the far side of her room. "Wait there for me," she said. "I will lock you safely in,—I must keep you for Harry,—I tried once to keep you for Richard." She laughed. "You conquer us all and our little plots, Mistress Meg," she said. "Come, go in and say your prayers, for you need them."

The girl, without a word, walked into the tiny room and knelt down before the solemn crucifix hanging there. Lady Marlowe looked after her, and the smile died from her mocking face; then she quickly shut the door, and turned the key, taking it out of the lock. "Not that, Antonio, not that reward!" she said to herself as she went on to meet him, for he was coming with swift light feet along the gallery.

Left alone in his room, Sir William Roden slept on, not without dreams. It would be hard to believe that the strange sounds and doings outside, the warning alarm of beast and bird, the sudden though silent changing of the guard, the cries of his old friends, dragged so horribly down from the moonlight into black depths of dungeon, had no influence on the good old master, though shut out from them by thick walls, heavy doors, and hangings. He smiled in his dreams, his weak arms moved jerkily. The disturbance in the air, for him, had nothing to do with treason at home or with the civil war that tore and distracted England. He was fighting in his dreams, attacking, resisting, commanding,—but not at Ruddiford. A small army, half-starved, reckless and determined, was flinging itself upon a great force of knights and men-at-arms,

a confused forest of banners and lances, crowded into a valley where they could fight, but not fly. It was Agincourt, and the young English squire, Will Roden, was in the front of the fray, no one nearer to his adored King Harry than he. Death was there, but he gave it not a thought; the dream was all a glory of courage and triumph, as the reality had been. Death indeed was nearer now, in his own castle, his own room, than in the thick of that heroic fight. It came stealing in, sweeping with soft folds across the floor.

The flaming logs had died down into red embers, and the white ashes were falling in heaps; the candle-light was dim. A tall figure with a pale face, with fierce eyes and set lips, hovered about the room, gliding gradually, noiselessly, nearer to the sleeping man. Round the back of his chair it came, and stood a moment on his left side, between him and the fire; its right hand, holding a slim, shining, pointed dagger, hung by its side. In this way, stealing by night, came Death to Sir William Roden.

He was smiling, his hands were moving again, and he began to mutter in his sleep. The woman who watched him thought that he was waking. With a quick shudder and a grimace, making a step forward, she lifted her right hand and struck him sharply below the left collar-bone. The blow waked him, but he was still at Agincourt, and cried aloud, opening his blue eyes wide: "God save King Harry! Now we be brothers in arms, Harry Marlowe!"

For him, the fight was over. It ended in the dream as in reality, with a blow on the shoulder: the blow of King Harry's sword, from which the squire rose up Sir William, was never consciously changed into the murderous stroke of a woman's poisoned dagger.

Her husband's name, the last on his old friend's lips, made Lady Marlowe tremble from head to foot. She had almost fled from the room, leaving the dagger there to accuse her of this crime; but her presence

of mind came back instantly. She withdrew the slender blade, wiped it, slipped it back into its place, and hidden in the shadow waited for the last heavy, long-drawn breaths with which the gallant old man set out, without priest to absolve or child to watch him, for the loyal land whither his fellow-fighters had gone before.

When all was still, Lady Marlowe went to the secret door under the hangings. It was ajar, as she expected, and Antonio was waiting in the gallery. He started violently when she came upon him, for she looked terrible, and gazed upon him, by the light of a candle she had taken up, almost as if her wits had left her. She beckoned to him without a word. The Italian threw himself suddenly on his knees, his teeth chattering so that he could only stammer out his words. "Nay, Madam, not that, I beseech you ! You know I cannot help you there, not even now for the reward you refused me. Madam, spare him ! I swear to you, that blood need not be shed. I will keep him safe,—he is helpless,—the place is in your hands,—he cannot resist you. Spare him, I implore you ! I will be your servant for ever——"

"That are you now, Antonio," she said. "Rise, miserable boy. Do you pretend to have loved your master ? Come here to me, I say."

She turned back into the room, and he tremblingly followed her.

Slowly and steadily, carrying the light, she approached the figure in the chair, and set it down near him. He had fallen a little aside, his hands clenched ; but the heavy eyelids were closed and there was no horror in the face ; the smile of his dreams had returned and was even deepening ; the pale skin was hardly yet paler than in life.

Antonio, for an instant, thought that Sir William was still sleeping. "He sleeps," he said, and went quickly towards him. "No, you shall not hurt him. I will defend him, cost what it may."

She looked upon him with bitter scorn. "Fool, he is dead."

"My God!" Antonio exclaimed under his breath. He went softly up to the old man, fell on his knees before him, touched his hand, stared up into his face. "Dead? It cannot be!" he muttered. "But where—how——"

"'Tis plain that you were bred in clumsy England," Lady Marlowe said, her voice, though very low, seeming to ring like a knell through the room. "Dead, yes, and little sign of how the death-stroke was given. It need scarce be known. The leech is in the dungeon. Let no old women come about him; thou and I, Antonio, must prepare him for his burial, and my men shall take up the stones of the chapel floor and lay him under them. What, fool, weeping? Didst think such a life as this would stand long between Edward of York and a strong place on the road to the north? On my life, wretch, I'll kill thee, too! Ha! and you dared speak of love to Mistress Roden, when I had refused her to you? By Heaven, I want you not, nor your service——"

Antonio was on his feet, flushed and passionate. "What? She told you?"

"Who should she tell? Mark me, villain, she is safe from you, double-dyed traitor as you are, to your master and to me! Attempt to see her again, and this point can pierce a young skin, even more easily—but what are we doing here?"

Antonio shrugged his shoulders. His eyes were full of hatred and fury, but he had prudence enough to keep back the defiance that rose to his lips. She had the power; the castle was in her hands; for the moment, Meg too was in her hands, and he would gain nothing by bluster. His old master was dead; at the last, he would have saved him; his death touched him more than he had thought possible. But he was dead; he could not be brought back; and now it was a question of fighting for one's own hand, at least to

gain Margaret. With hurrying hands and feet, and without another word, he set to obeying her. First, she ordered him to give her his master's will, which made her guardian of Margaret. He knew where to find the old man's keys; and in a few minutes he had unlocked the great chest where the deeds of the estate were, and had taken out the parchment signed on that November night, in which Sir William, contrary to the advice of his best friends, had shown such fatal loyalty to the name of Marlowe.

"And the rest of the deeds are for me," she said, leaning greedily over the depths of the chest. "The executors are as good as dead; I am the one authority. Lock the chest again, and give me the keys."

As he hesitated, she snatched them from him, and thrusting the will inside her dress, turned back again to the silent, awful figure in the chair. With Antonio's help, he shivering in the nervous horror that had seized him, and marvelling at her supernatural strength, she carried or dragged Sir William to his own bed, in an adjoining room, laid him there, with outstretched limbs and folded hands, and then with the same terrible calmness placed a crucifix at his head and four lighted candles at the corners of his bed.

Then she ordered Antonio to watch till her return, and went alone down the great staircase, intending to inspect the castle, to see, by the bright shining of the moon, that all her men were in their appointed places. They must be ready to receive Lord Marlowe and Sir William's men, at any hour in the morning, with the news that the old knight had died suddenly, and that she had taken possession of Ruddiford Castle in the name of the White Rose.

It was not likely that Antonio would remain where she left him, alone with the kind old master he had betrayed. A few minutes he waited there on his knees, watching the white face on the pillow, as it gradually lost its first look of life and became more

waxen, more majestically calm, passing farther every instant from the jarring turmoil of weary life.

The strange creature who watched the dead face was almost surprised to find that tears were running down his cheeks. He had not known what it would be. An hour or two ago, he would have given Sir William's life and all the lives in the castle, to be taken by his own hand, for the promise of Margaret. She had been refused him : her guardian and herself had alike refused him, with the scorn he might have expected : but his disappointment had not been Sir William's salvation. In all this matter Lady Marlowe's strong will had had its way, and would have it, so far as he could see, to the end. The unholy alliance with her had not helped Antonio, and never would. He cared not much, he thought, for money and power ; he did not believe in her promises ; he saw York triumphing by her means, and himself, the poor stepping-stone, thrown out upon a dunghill. All he had had, or ever would have, it seemed, was the small satisfaction of cheating Lord Marlowe and Jasper Tilney, so that neither of them should have the prize denied to him, and of seeing his contemptuous old enemies, the vicar, the lawyer, the apothecary, flung into the dungeon and in danger of death.

But there might be a greater satisfaction still. He knew, in the depths of his heart, that the one thing he now longed for was revenge on Lady Marlowe, vengeance for her insolent scorn of himself, vengeance for the murder of Sir William. No ! If she believed that Antonio, a craven slave, would let her work out her designs unchecked, that he, like the other poor sheep of Ruddiford, but without their excuse, being neither gagged nor chained, would give up the castle to York and its mistress to any Yorkist noble Lady Marlowe might choose,—if she believed this, as it seemed, she was mistaken.

He rose from his knees, and his deep eyes rested a moment on the face of his master. The selfish, wicked

youth, treacherous as he had been and guilty of the old man's death, still loved him in his own mysterious way. He stooped and touched the folded hands with his lips, then started back with chattering teeth ; but he vowed to Sir William that, if he could save it, Ruddiford should not be lost to the Red Rose. Even here, true to himself, he was half-hearted, for no remorse or ancient love would make him renounce the hope of winning for himself what Sir William had assuredly never given him, a greater treasure than all the castles in England.

However, the promise once made, life and courage, deadened by Lady Marlowe's baleful influence, seemed to come back to Antonio. He slipped from the room and stole down the stairs. At a corner he stopped suddenly, for there was a gleam of light below, and voices talking. He crept along the wall like a shadow,—no one could move more noiselessly—and saw Lady Marlowe at the foot of the stairs, and old Dame Kate with her.

The old woman, white and frightened, was muttering fears and fancies into Lady Marlowe's impatient ear. There was something wrong, she was sure : the women and maidens could not sleep for fear ; the noises of the night were terrible ; she had heard screams of murder and treason ; it was very late, and Mistress Meg had not yet come to her bed-chamber. No doubt she was still with Sir William, but Dame Kate was on her way to call her ; she must not wander about the castle so late alone.

"With our men away and the dogs howling a-that'ns !" muttered the old dame anxiously.

Lady Marlowe laughed softly ; something in her tone made Antonio shiver again. "You are a wise soul, dame," she said. "Comfort yourself. "Your master has gone to rest, Antonio attending him ; your young mistress is in my lodging, and will spend the night with me. Bad dreams, bad dreams ! You and your maids have eaten too much,—and in Lent, for shame !"

"But Mistress Meg will want me," the old nurse pleaded, puzzled and doubtful. "May I follow your ladyship? But verily my lamb would sleep better in her own bed."

"Dame, it is my will that she should sleep where she is now," Lady Marlowe answered. "I have women enough to attend on her. I left her at her evening prayers in the oratory. Go back to your maidens—sleep, all of you. I am awake, watching,—the guards are set,—do you hear me? Be gone to your bed."

Dame Kate turned slowly away, grumbling to herself; but there was no disobeying this stately lady, no parleying with her.

When she was gone, stumping into the distance, Lady Marlowe glided softly on alone across the moonlit court. Antonio followed her far off, like a stealing shadow, watched her as she went towards the town gate, and then turned and fled another way.

Chapter XVII

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

MEG remained in the oratory, a not unwilling prisoner, waiting for Lady Marlowe's return. She could hardly cheat her now ; there seemed no reason to suppose that she was false in accepting the marriage with Harry, now that her Popinjay had put himself out of the question. Her anger at Antonio's presumption was as great as, almost greater than, Meg's own ; her chief desire was to keep the girl safe from him, especially while so many of her natural defenders, Black Andrew and all the best of her grandfather's men, were away from the castle. All this seemed clear to Meg. The knowledge that Lady Marlowe was not loyal to the faith of her House did not greatly trouble her. How could anything come of that, so long as her grandfather lived, and she herself, and all the good men of Ruddiford ? Harry himself might ride away to the Queen, or might hurry straight to Ruddiford ; that would make no difference to the holding of the place. So long as Sir William Roden's yellow banner floated from the keep, it was safe for the Red Rose ; and who dared haul it down ?

The oratory was very small, a slit in the thickness of the wall. There was nothing in it but a fald-stool, a table with candles, and the crucifix. Meg knelt and said her evening prayer.

Something in the strangeness of the night, in the glimmering moon through the window, the candles burning yellow and low, weighed heavily on her spirit. Though brave-hearted, and knowing no special cause

for terror, she trembled and hid her face. Never in her young life, always good and Christian and obedient to the daily duties of her religion, had she felt so strangely the necessity of that religion's truth. She felt that powers beyond her sight, till now almost beyond her imagination, were watching her, that tall angels with long wings and swords were guarding her, filling the narrow little room. His Angels, truly, had charge over her ; Sir Thomas had said it, and it was true. And then as her lips murmured prayers for all dear to her, while she thought of the old man sleeping, as well as the prisoner at King's Hall, there came the strangest feeling that her grandfather was standing by, his hand upon her shoulder. She started, opened her eyes and looked round. Neither was he there, nor any guardian angels.

She closed her eyes and prayed again, though troubled by the fancy. Then she heard sounds, which seemed to come from outside ; but that could not very well be, for the window was high above the ramparts, Lady Marlowe's women must be moving about ; or it might be herself, coming back to unlock the door. No, there was a noise at the window. Meg lifted her head once more, and with wide eyes and parted lips looked up that way.

The moonlight was blocked, and the candles showed a face and two hands pressed against the window. The next instant the casement flew open, forced in by those strong hands, and Antonio leaned in, his elbows on the sill, with wild looks devouring the girl who still knelt there. She started up, and drew back to the furthest corner of the tiny room ; but yet, though her heart beat violently, she was more angry than afraid. " Why do you intrude upon me here ? " she said. " Is no place sacred from you ? Will you not understand that I hate you, Antonio ? "

" Well you may," he said.

She shrank a little from his eyes, and yet the look in them was hardly the same as when he had pleaded

with her in the gallery, such a short time before. "Go," she said. "I know not how you came, how you climbed here—but go, I say!" and she stamped her foot. "Go, or I call my Lady Marlowe."

"She is not there," he said.

Instead of dropping from the window-ledge, or climbing back by the way he had come, he pulled himself up and sat upon the sill, with one foot on the floor of the oratory.

"Fair lady," he said, and smiled at Meg, "pardon my not standing in your presence, but I must escape quickly. You think me wicked, but the she-devil who has made you her captive here is blacker by many a shade than I. Listen while I tell you."

"What is the use?" Meg was beginning; but he waved his hand eagerly to silence her, and then plunged into his story, which kept her indeed breathless with horror. Staring at him, growing whiter every moment, she listened with eyes and ears intent. Once she looked up at the crucifix. Could God rule the world, and such things be?

Lady Marlowe's men held the castle, and no Lancastrian would enter it any more. A messenger to Edward of York had summoned him to send a troop to hold it safely and strongly. The keys were in her ladyship's hands; she had thrown the Vicar into the dungeon, with Timothy and Simon Toste to keep him company, "and she will hang them," said Antonio, "sooner than set them free to lead the town. She hath a special hatred to Master Simon, besides."

Here Meg cried, "But my grandfather——"

He dropped suddenly from the window-sill and knelt at her feet. "Mistress Meg, dear Meg, I would not do it," he said. "I told you that your promise to me would have saved him; but without that promise I did my best, though too late, alas! I prayed her to spare him, but he stood in her way. Now,—oh Meg!—Ruddiford is yours, and you are hers—there is no more to be said. You look wild

you do not understand me ; he is dead, dead ! She has killed him."

The girl stood like stone. "Killed him ?" she repeated, very low.

Antonio stood up, trembling as he looked at her. His eyes burned, his hands were ready to seize her, and yet he dared not touch her. "Do not swoon away," he said in a hurried whisper. "Come with me. I will take you to King's Hall, I will defend you with my life. See, I have a rope outside. Trust yourself to me, and I will lift you to the eaves, and then bring you down to the ramparts by a way I know, and then across the river into the fields, and she shall not find you. I am going,—whether you come or not,—but come with me, my Queen ! On my honour, I will take you safe to King's Hall, and if your fine lover there can win back Ruddiford for you, let him. Revenge on her, for all she has done and made me do, that is all I ask now. Come,—your old Tonio, who will serve you faithfully, like the dog he is—Meg, do you hear me ?"

"I hear you," the girl said. "And you, a man, you tell me you could not defend or save him, not though you knew—when you spoke to me in the gallery, *that* was what you meant ! Poor wretch ; and you are sorry ! You, then, are the traitor who has betrayed us all. You were the cause of Lord Marlowe's capture ; you are the cause that my grandfather—go ! as for me, I will not leave Ruddiford. Not from fear of you, hound, but the place is mine, and here I stay."

"Meg, I cannot leave you in the hands of that woman !" Antonio said.

"She will not hurt me," the girl answered. "I fear her not."

Till now she had spoken very calmly. He thought she was half stunned by the shock, and indeed at first it was so. But she was waking up by degrees, and now a light dawned in her eyes, and she looked

suddenly into his face with a new expression. "Villain—Antonio—you lie!" she said. "This is some devilish plot. He is not dead. You tell me this to frighten me, that you may carry me away. No! You, even you, could not have stood by to see that old man foully slain. You are a liar, a villain, Antonio!"

She had raised her voice, and as she spoke Antonio heard sounds in the room outside, light steps, the sweeping of a train. Another moment, and the key was suddenly thrust into the lock. It turned with a grinding noise, and Lady Marlowe flung open the door. At the same instant the young man sprang at the open window. He had a rope, as he had told Meg, fastened outside. He had already swung himself from the ledge, as it were into empty space, disappearing at once from the moonlight into the over-hanging shadow of the stone-work above. He saved himself by an inch, by a second only, for Isabel darted from the door and threw herself also upon the window, striking out wildly at the vanishing figure with the dagger clenched in her right hand. But Antonio was gone.

She leaned from the window for a minute or two, looking, listening; but he was far out of her reach, and she could only hear a distant scrambling, which might have been a rat among the rafters or an owl disturbed in the ivy.

"Ape and devil—devil and ape!" she said between her teeth; then she turned her awful eyes on Margaret, who at that moment saw and knew that Antonio had not lied. The horror came upon her in all its freshness; she looked at the woman's face, and at the long sharp blade in her hand, which she did not try to hide. Her heart seemed to stand still, her brain to be deadened, her voice choked in her throat. Yes, Death stood there; and it would not be strange, she knew now, if that dagger were to sheath itself in her own side. Her eyes not moving from Lady Mar-

lowe's, she drew a little nearer to the crucifix on the wall, put her hand out slowly, and groping, as if in darkness touched the nailed feet.

A word hissed from Isabel's lips—"Fool!" A moment, and she repeated it—"Fool! I shall not hurt you."

Meg tried to say, "I do not fear you;" and it would not have been false, for, undefended girl as she was, the feeling that held her was far more horror than fear; but no words would make their way.

It seemed like minutes, though it was only seconds, that Lady Marlowe glared upon her. Then with a quick movement she swept through the door, shut it sharply and locked it again.

Meg knew herself to be a prisoner indeed, but little thought of her own fate troubled her. As soon as the stony stiffness in her limbs allowed her to move, she sank on her knees and remained there, not consciously praying, but lifting her whole heart to the God who had guarded her young life till now.

Antonio escaped by the way he had reserved for himself, and only just in time, for Lady Marlowe sent men to watch for him at every exit from the castle. Wet and shivering from his crossing at the weir, his heart heavy within him, the future dark to him, terribly haunted by Meg's face, still more by Isabel's murderous eyes, he dragged himself across country to King's Hall. What state of things he would find there, he knew not, or what had happened to Black Andrew and his men. As he drew near, all the country seemed as still and lonely as if no armed men had passed that way; and the night had grown darker, for clouds had come up and veiled the moon.

There were no lights about King's Hall; but as he stumbled across the rough field, men suddenly rose up on each side and challenged him.

"'Tis thou, Master Tonio? What brings you here? Cannot I do my work without you being sent

to spy after me? I wager this is my Lady's doing; you are her pet, her cosset lamb, eh?"

It was Black Andrew's gruff voice. Antonio shook off the heavy hand from his shoulder. "What," he said, "lying out here on the grass? Where's my Lord Marlowe? I thought King's Hall would be burnt down by now. What have you and your fellows been doing?"

"Why, we rattled at the gate and demanded the prisoner. Master Tilney ordered us off and the Fellowship showed their teeth. They sent a shower of arrows among us in the bright moonshine, which killed Jack Kay, and wounded Michael and John Nash. We've laid them away in the copse yonder. I feigned to draw off, see you, but here I've got the trunk of a fir-tree, and as it will be darker towards morning, I was waiting till they were all quiet to ram in the big gates suddenly. Then, if they won't give up my Lord in peace, they shall fight with us hand to hand,—and we be the stronger men. There now, get you back to my Lady and tell her this tale."

"I have another tale to tell," Antonio said. "Give me that horn of thine. I must wake these gentlemen with a rousing note or two."

"Nay,—what——"

"Listen, and you will know."

He took the horn that Andrew wore slung by his side, and walked forward without any care for concealment, till he stood on the open space in front of the great gates of King's Hall. Then through the silent dimness of the night he wound a few loud and musical notes, which rang defiant on the air, and were answered by the flashing of lights in the front of the old house rising with its high walls and beetling gables beyond the archway.

After the blast had been repeated three or four times, ever louder and more insistent, a voice answered it from behind some loophole near the gate. "Get you gone, Black Andrew. Do you want another

lesson ? By our Lady, you shall have it in five minutes. Go back to that old master of yours, and tell him 'tis not worthy of his grey hairs to send his ruffians to storm an honest man's house at midnight. Tell him my prisoner he shall not have, and that I will take order for my own affairs, without his meddling. Do you hear me, fellow ? ”

The answer was unexpected ; the very voice had a tone that was irresistible, ringing like strong and wild music through the night.

“ Master Jasper Tilney, you know not to whom you are speaking. I, Antonio, have fled from Ruddiford to call for your help in the name of the Red Rose. My Lady Marlowe has taken possession and is holding the castle for York, till Edward sends her support, or till his army marches this way. Sir William, my master is dead by her hand ; she holds Mistress Roden a strict prisoner ; she hath also thrown the chief worthies of Ruddiford into the dungeon, and such of the garrison as were left last night she hath overpowered easily. And I, who have escaped, I call on you and your bold Fellowship to ride and come to the rescue. Master Tilney, this is no time for quarrelling about a prisoner. I call you, my master's nearest neighbour and a Lancastrian, to avenge his foul murder, to save Ruddiford, to set free——”

The shouts, the angry cries and furious questions of Black Andrew and his men broke in upon Antonio.

Jasper Tilney made him no answer ; but in a few minutes the clank of armed men was heard in the court, the gates were unbarred and opened, and Jasper came out upon the green alone, carrying a lanthorn. “ Hark you, Antonio,” he said, and held up the light to his face ; “ you are not lying to me ? This tale is true ? ”

“ Why should I lie to you ? ” Antonio said, and flushing, looked him boldly in the face. “ For whose advantage is it that I should offer you the rescuing of Mistress Margaret ? ”

Jasper stared at him a moment, with scorn and no understanding. What was the menial thinking of? Then he turned and shouted to his companions. "Go up, some of you, to my Lord Marlowe. Tell him the news this fellow brings. Offer him from me a horse and a good sword. Say I wait him here, without conditions, to ride with me to Ruddiford. Sir William dead! God in heaven, what next? A good old man, a true soldier and gentleman, though he could not away with me. God rest him!—Fellows, are you making ready there?"

As the crowd of men surged round him at the gates, with flashing lights and glittering arms, crying "A Lancaster!" Jasper Tilney dashed away most unaccustomed tears from those bold blue eyes of his.

Black Andrew strode up to him and saluted. "Sir, I have a letter for my Lord Marlowe."

Jasper took Meg's letter from him without a glance, and gave it to a servant. "Take it to my Lord."

Chapter XVIII

THE SIEGE

THEN began that siege of Ruddiford Castle of which the traditions, and even the records, have come down through centuries. Town and country against castle, and this defended by a mere handful of men, it yet held out for days, such was the spirit of the woman who commanded it.

Each morning, Lord Marlowe himself, pale and ghastly from his captivity, came to the town gate and demanded his stepmother's surrender; each morning she defied him in person, mocking and telling him to ride away to his Queen, who would soon be in sore need of his services. High on the keep the banner of York flew, spreading its heavy folds in the bitter east wind that blew over the dark fields of February; the Roden colours had disappeared, perhaps for ever. Isabel pointed upwards, and aughed at the stern faces grouped far below.

A party of resolute men were assembled there. Lord Marlowe, Jasper Tilney, his daring Fellowship, Black Andrew with his dead master's little band of men,—all with set teeth swearing vengeance on the Jezebel who had murdered him. Last, not least, Antonio slipped from one to another, advising, suggesting, taking no heed of the impatient scorn which met him, for no one knew the ins and outs, the byways of the castle, better than he, and not Lord Marlowe himself was more eager to enter it.

The archers and cross-bow men climbed to the roofs of the near houses, and sent showers of bolts and arrows over the ramparts and into the courts. It was only by extreme caution that Lady Marlowe's men could escape that deadly hail; but they, in their turn, took advantage of the loopholes near the gates,

and repaid the besiegers in their own coin. Many Roden men fell dead and were carried away; and not only the men-at-arms, but several of the townspeople who volunteered to help in the assault on one gate or another. These were furious with rage and terror, for their old traditions had taught them to hate the very name of York, and now their Vicar, loved as a man and revered as a saint, was lying in peril of death in the castle dungeon along with their two best fellow-townsmen. What was Ruddiford without the three quaint, beloved figures, Sir Thomas Pye and his two friends, Timothy and Simon?

The besiegers brought battering-rams to drive open the gates, being already in possession of the bridge and all the precincts of the castle; but the besieged were before them with great stones and boiling oil, so that they could not approach near enough for their purpose. Day by day these assaults were renewed; day by day they were foiled by the quickness and resolution of Lady Marlowe and her men. The castle had passed from the Red to the White Rose, and it began to seem likely that Lady Marlowe would successfully hold it till a Yorkist force should sweep that way, taking possession of town as well as castle, driving away the little Lancastrian troop and overawing the country.

Popular rumour, which flew from end to end of England as the war ebbed and flowed, had already spread the news that Queen Margaret's St. Albans victory had not been followed up by any general triumph of her cause. London, it seemed, would have none of her, maddened as she was by revenge, and unable or unwilling to keep her wild northern troops in any sort of order. Rumours that she was likely to move northward again with the King and Prince, in search of reinforcements from the Midlands, always loyal to her, reached the Ruddiford besiegers and nerved them to stronger efforts. Lord Marlowe's face grew more worn and stern every day. The

Queen might be in need of her faithful servant ; but he had vowed not to leave Ruddiford till he could rescue Margaret Roden from his stepmother's hands, and carry her with him. In spite of the girl's generous letter, which lay next his heart, he could not leave her among dangers which would not end with her present captivity.

All that went on within the walls was well enough known to the townspeople without. Watchmen on the church-tower, where the colours of Roden and Lancaster still waved together as the Vicar had long ago hoisted them, saw the movements of the small garrison as if from the keep itself. News worked its way out, too. On the first day the ringers tolled the church-bells, for they saw a funeral procession on its way from the hall to the chapel, and they could even hear the voice of Sir Thomas Pye, strong and trembling, as he, with chains on his wrists, by Lady Marlowe's orders, committed his old friend's body to the dust. Somehow, it was known in the town that after this hasty funeral her ladyship held a mock trial, and accused the Vicar and his two friends of having murdered Sir William. They had been the last alone with him. She had not her precious witness, Antonio, it was true, but she was in no mood for formalities. When the three worthies were dragged back to the dungeon whence they came, their lives were already forfeit to the vengeance of a wicked woman.

While the Ruddiford men, moved to greater fury by the imminent danger of those they loved and respected, were attacking the town-gate more violently than ever, Antonio, believing more in intrigue than in force, spent most of his time creeping from point to point below the walls, searching for any undefended corner where the garrison might be taken by surprise. His admiration for Lady Marlowe's genius and daring went on deepening, while his terror and hatred deepened too. She had indeed done wonders with her small

band ; it seemed as if by miracle she had multiplied them. Such entrances as could not be defended were by her orders built up with stones ; one of these, as Antonio soon discovered, was the door of which he had the key, and by which he had escaped from the castle. Some secret attraction drew him to watch that corner of the ramparts. Great bushes of ivy hung down the old walls there, the thick stems rooted in the grass bank below which the river flowed, hurrying over the weir. Close by was the sluice belonging to the castle mill, where the stream was divided by the buildings, half of it being in the control of the miller, who was still there, though he and his men hardly dared to show themselves for fear of bolts and arrows from the castle.

Antonio was watching this corner in the twilight, when suddenly, as if in answer to his expectations, he saw a figure on the ramparts, just above the place where the door used to be. It was a small, squat figure,—a woman, he thought, though he could not see clearly in the shadows. In another moment it had disappeared.

The wind, which had lulled towards evening, sprang up again and rustled the trees and swung the masses of ivy. There was shouting from the town, and a sudden barking of dogs within the castle.

Antonio waited near the river, hidden behind a willow tree ; but though he strained his eyes and ears, he could see and hear nothing more, till suddenly, in a pause between the gusts of wind and a lull in the distant noises, he first was aware of the same squat figure standing on the wall of the sluice, and then heard a loud splash and a short shriek, this seemingly instantly choked, as if the escaping creature remembered that there might be a worse fate than to be drowned in the Ruddy.

Antonio dashed into the water, which was not deep, though at this time of the year very muddy. Seizing the woman by her wet clothes, he dragged her with

some difficulty to the farther bank, and found that it was Dame Kate who had thus adventured herself beyond the walls, and having exhausted her strength and nerves in clambering down, had turned giddy on the sluice with the dark water slipping about her feet.

She sat on the bank behind the willows, her teeth chattering, and tried to answer Antonio's impatient questions. Like the rest of the household, she had never loved him, but he was now on the right side; he had saved her life, and the old soul clung to him as a friend, however rough his words might be.

"You old fool!" he cried in her ear. "Why come out alone? If you knew a way, why not bring Mistress Margaret with you?"

"Mistress Margaret?" she said, with a sob and a laugh. "Heaven send she may be alive! My lamb! I have not set eyes on her since the night the dogs howled and Sir William died,—that was foul play, foul play, Master Tony. My Lady keeps her locked up in her own rooms—the saints grant she feeds her!—it is but little we get, me and the maids. They say the siege will be long, for she'll hold Ruddiford till the army do come and drive you all away, and provisions is short, they say. And Sir Thomas and Masters Toste, they be to die to-morrow at dawn; useless mouths she says, they tell me, and she calls them murderers, but I'll take my oath they never touched his worship. Why, they loved him as well as you or I."

"Is that all the news you have to bring, dame? What did you come out for? How did you do it? Is there no guard within there?"

"Nay, he was gone to get his supper—and now the door is walled up, they think it safe—but I be-thought me of the ivy there. I've known young men climb down that way to see their sweethearts. I was a-going to find out Master Tilney or my Lord, and tell them if I could scramble out, with my old dizzy head and risk o' broken bones, they could climb

in. Quiet in the dark, they'd manage it. They'd cross the weir and the sluice, and not tumble in like me."

"Well said, dame; you have done bravely," said Antonio. He smiled brightly and held out his hand to her. "Up, then! Come along with me to the bridge. There's a fire in the tower, and you can dry and warm yourself, while I go to the gentlemen."

The old woman, already stiff from her wetting, moved slowly and painfully over the long damp grass. Antonio gave her his arm, and guided her tottering steps with sufficient kindness. While she chattered of the state of things within the castle it was only half his brain that listened and understood. The other half was full of a plan of his own.

In the meanwhile, he approved of her opinion that all this noisy attack from without would be easily resisted for many days, and would most certainly cost the life of the three worthies, if not of Margaret. If the castle was to be taken at all, it must be by immediate, secret surprise. Dame Kate was a clever, practical old soul. Antonio laughed triumphantly; he saw his way; it seemed to him that the ball was at his feet again. "Ay, dame! Tell it all to my Lord Marlowe and Master Tilney," he said. "They will give you a reward, and by the Red Rose of Lancaster you deserve it. To climb down a wall and cross a river at three-score years and ten!"

"Nay, nay!" cried Dame Kate, offended. "I'm yet a good few years short of that, Master Tony! I'm not so old as the poor master, by many a day."

"Don't talk of him—we have to avenge him," Antonio said hurriedly. "Hold your peace; the men on the bridge will hear."

Freed from the damp weight of Dame Kate on his arm, having deposited her safe and alone in the low chamber of the bridge-gate, where a fire was smouldering, Antonio hurried on up the narrow street in search of Lord Marlowe and Jasper Tilney.

As luck would have it, he found them standing

together under a hanging lantern at a corner of the ways, near the town-gate of the castle, but sheltered from the bowmen on its walls by a house intervening. They had been consulting with Black Andrew as to a new attack, and he had moved off to warn the men of the town. In the meanwhile, the ringers of the parish church were using up their own energy and distracting the people's brains by ringing a funeral chime for those, Sir William Roden and others, who had already lost their lives in this corner of the great struggle. Masses for their souls were said every morning by the parish priest of King's Hall, whom Jasper had dragged to Ruddiford, sorely against his will.

The two leaders stood together, Jasper Tilney upright, fierce, and soldierly, Harry Marlowe stooping slightly, pale and wan and stiff in his limbs, with dreamy eyes lifted to the high keep where the hated ensign of York streamed in the evening wind. He had never looked much of a warrior, and now he was more than ever the delicate, elegant gentleman, the courtier, of that highest sort which is simple and unconventional in manners and ways. Philosophy had a great part in such a man's courage; fear was unknown; for him, all the heroic virtues and the graces of chivalry had never needed any learning. Sir Thomas Malory might have made him the model, perhaps did make him so, for the finest of his gentle knights when he wrote the *Morte D'Arthur*.

Jasper Tilney was a soldier before he was a gentleman, and a rustic one at best. Harry Marlowe was a gentleman before he was a soldier, and the perfection of the one character entailed that of the other.

Strangely friendly were these two as they stood together, rivals in love, and one so lately the captive of the other. For the past, it seemed that Lord Marlowe had forgotten it; of the future, nothing was said, each being determined to bend it to his own will; for the present, their object was the same, to gain back Ruddiford Castle for the Red Rose, to avenge Sir William Roden, and to set Margaret free.

To them, as they stood thus, Antonio darted out of the shadows of the street. "Sirs," he said, "I have found a way into the castle, by which one has escaped, one who can inform you of all that goes on within. Patience, Master Tilney," as Jasper started forward with an oath. "We need caution and silence." He paused, and looked from one to the other.

"Go on," Lord Marlowe commanded, and Jasper fidgeted with his sword.

They were both tall men, much taller than the Italian, small and slight of build. In every sense they looked down upon him, and he felt it, and shivered with rage. But he spoke in even and quiet tones. "To-morrow at dawn my Lady Marlowe will put to death those Ruddiford townsmen who are in her power, the Vicar and the others. It is not certain that she will spare the life of—of Mistress Roden."

"Impossible, fellow!" said Lord Marlowe. "You are dreaming. Her ladyship is not the devil in woman's form——" and Jasper swore violently again.

"She is desperate, my Lord, and there is great danger," said Antonio. "We must take the castle to-night, and it can only be done in the way that I shall show you."

"But show us then," shouted Jasper; "go before us. Where is this escaped man? Where is Black Andrew?" and he whistled loudly.

"My Lord, restrain him, he is mad," exclaimed Antonio. "Do you wish to raise an alarm, Master Tilney? Listen to me, Sirs. Nay, by all that's holy, you shall have not another word from me, unless you hear me and agree to my condition. This matter is in my hands; I only know where the escaped person is to be found. Ay, listen. You two, my fine masters, with your noisy blundering attacks upon this gate and that, will let the prize perish while you are knocking on the outside of the casket. I have found a way in. But for whose advantage, do you think? Yours, Master Tilney? Yours my Lord? Am I

to lead you into the castle, and stand by smiling while you fight each other for its mistress ? ”

Lord Marlowe looked in scornful silence, though his pale brown skin reddened a little under the insolent words. Jasper was ready to speak ; he had often before given Antonio a taste of his anger. “ What does the cur mean ? ” he said. “ Little blackfaced foreign dog and son of a dog, what have you to do with gentlemen and their affairs ? This is a matter that my Lord and I will settle for ourselves, and by the Lord, ’tis little to us whether you smile or frown. What do you want then, hound, for this trick of yours, this way in ? A purse of gold, I suppose. What shall we give him, my Lord ? ”

Harry Marlowe’s brown eyes, reflective and deep, rested on the Italian’s face which seemed to flame in the lanthorn’s light. “ I doubt his presumption is high,” he said, “ and gold will not satisfy him. What condition is this of yours, Master Secretary ? ”

“ You are right, my Lord,” said Antonio ; “ my presumption is high, of the highest, the height of your own. I will have my chance of winning the prize, equally with yourselves. I have loved her from a child, before Master Tilney,—and your love, my Lord, is of yesterday.”

Harry still looked at him steadily. Jasper flushed crimson and drew his sword. “ What, miserable scum of the earth ! Thou, beggar’s brat—why, I’ll kill thee ! ”

“ Patience, spare the poor wretch,” Harry said, and stretched his arm between the sharp blade and Antonio. “ And this mad dream of yours,” he said to him, “ how far doth it carry you ? What are the terms of your condition ? ”

Antonio bowed. Jasper dropped his point, and stood scowling.

“ I will show you an easy way of taking the castle this very night,” Antonio said, “ if you will do this. Swear on your honours as English gentlemen that

when 'tis taken, you two will draw equal lots with me. Three straws there shall be, one longer than the other two. They shall be held by a person ignorant of what he, or she, is doing. He who draws the longest straw gains the prize, Mistress Margaret Roden and the Lordship of Ruddiford."

"Never, villain! Let me kill him, my Lord!" cried Jasper Tilney.

"And lose the chance of rescuing her from present and great danger?" said Harry Marlowe thoughtfully.

He drew Jasper away a pace or two, and spoke to him aside, while Antonio waited in silence. "God and Our Lady will not have it," he said. "Such a thing never happened, that a lady like this was given to a low-born foreigner. Let it be, Master Tilney. The lot will fall to you or me, and then—let follow what may!" Jasper, still scowling, shook his head. "I like it not," he said; "'tis tempting Providence too far. Suppose the lot fell to him. You say it cannot happen, but by Heaven, I am not so sure. Worse things have happened."

"Nay, sir, nothing so evil ever did happen in God's world," Harry said confidently. "And so let us trust God, and take it." He stepped back to Antonio, saying quietly, with a curious light in his eyes: "Sir, your condition is accepted. But remember, presumption, as well as pride, hath a fall."

"Swear then, my Lord," said Antonio eagerly.

"I swear," Harry answered.

"And you, Master Tilney?"

"I swear, as my Lord wills it," Jasper answered. "But I would rather have laid you dead at my feet, Tonio, and if the devil is in those straws, and the lot falls to you, beware of me!"

Antonio smiled at the threat. Now, if never before, the ball was at his feet, and his heart beat high with assured triumph. What was the use of being Italian, if in such a game of wits he could not match two thick-brained Englishmen?

Chapter XIX

THE SURPRISE

MIDNIGHT was chiming. Margaret Roden lay on the floor in a corner of Lady Marlowe's room, and reached in that hour, one would have thought, the climax of her misery.

During these days of siege she had never been outside the door which she had entered on the night of her grandfather's murder. She had seen none of her own people. Lady Marlowe's women, silent and in terror of her, waited grudgingly on the prisoner. She was not indeed starved, as her old nurse feared; Lady Marlowe did not wish utterly to destroy the girl's beauty, though she was bent on crushing her spirit.

Margaret felt herself under some evil spell, which took away all power of resistance. It was not necessary to keep her by violence; she submitted silently, and waited. Something must happen. Black Andrew the faithful, with her grandfather's men, would never tamely give up Ruddiford and herself to enemies and murderers. Harry would come; she knew that. She guessed well enough that they were there even now, storming outside the walls, friends and champions of herself and the Red Rose. Antonio too,—wretch as he was, he loved her in his way. Something told her that he too would never rest so long as she was in this woman's power.

Lady Marlowe did not harm her. She hardly spoke to her, letting her wander in the daytime from the larger rooms into the oratory, and there spend hours,

if she chose, upon her knees. The nights were worse, for then a chain was fastened to her waist, and like a captive animal she was tethered to a great chest, and left to lie there on the floor.

And on this night, careless of her hearing it all, Lady Marlowe had given commands to her men as to the execution next morning of the three other chief prisoners she held. A tall gibbet was set up in the courtyard,—Meg heard the hammering—and on that, side by side, Sir Thomas Pye, Timothy Toste, and Simon Toste, were to hang till they were dead. And then,—the Baroness went on giving her orders, cold, unmoved, in low tones and with a face like marble—they were to be taken down, and their heads cut off, and set up in a row over the town-gate of the castle. “And if the townsmen cry upon you from without,” Lady Marlowe said, “bid them remember Wakefield. Greater men perished there.”

Then Margaret Roden struggled up from the corner where she lay, her chain rattling, and cried “Madam !” in a voice that was hoarse with horror and long silence. Lady Marlowe turned her face towards the girl, but did not speak. “Madam,” Meg said, “God will punish you, if you kill these good men. Rather take my life, I beseech you. It is worthless ; I will give it for theirs.”

“Silence !” Lady Marlowe answered. “Why should I bargain with you ? Your life is mine, mistress, as well as theirs. Pray to your Saints that I may not take that too !”

The men smiled to each other and went. There was silence without, except for the wind ; the besiegers seemed to be tired out and resting. Meg leaned her head against the wall and said no more, watching Lady Marlowe as she moved about the room, and finally sat down at the table with a mass of deeds and papers before her. These she had taken from Sir William’s chest, and now, eagerly fingering them, bending over them with greedy eyes, she sorted out

those which were of the most importance to possessors of Ruddiford. The girl, the owner of it all, lay chained and watching her. The hours crept on, and the wild wind howled in the chimney, the candles flickered, and shadows seemed to steal about the room. Did Lady Marlowe mean to sit up all night? Would those terrible, bright eyes never be closed or dim? As to Margaret, she felt she would never sleep again. The ghastly picture of the death of the three old friends brought back with added horror the thought of her grandfather, so good, so noble, the victim of this woman's ambition and cruelty. At the time, the news of his murder had almost stunned her; now she woke to an agony of realization. The world was crumbling around her. From a happy home Ruddiford Castle had become an awful prison, full of blood and crime and misery.

But when midnight began to chime, the very exhaustion of terror and grief had brought its reaction to the tired girl, and she slept, crouching in her corner, her face still turned as if watching the woman at the table. She, too, weary with the incessant labour of the day, of directing the defence, deciding the fates of men, planning a safe enjoyment of the future, had been overcome by sleep. A dead torpor had seized her brain. Lying back against the high carved chair, she breathed heavily with parted lips and frowning forehead. There was something dreadful in her very repose.

One or two women, waiting till she chose to be undressed, peeped with weary yawns from the door leading into the bedchamber. They dared not wake her, or make any noise. The wind had risen higher, it thundered in the chimney, and the candle-flames blew wildly about, wax splashing on the papers piled on the table.

Then the shadows took the forms of men; the women were seized and dragged back silently, with broad hands shutting their mouths, and Margaret Roden,

forgetting life and its terrors in a dream of Harry Marlowe, was lifted from her sleep into his arms.

The wild tumult in the castle, the shrieks of panic, the clashing of swords and pikes, as her garrison made its weak defence, far outnumbered by the crowds that streamed in, woke Lady Marlowe.

Starting from her heavy sleep, she snatched at her dagger; but a swifter hand still was ready for her. Antonio caught it from her before she was well awake, and she had scarcely recognized him when he vanished again into the shadows. Disarmed, raging, she turned from side to side, and saw men-at-arms with the Roden and Lancaster colours, guarding each door, while beyond them her stepson Harry, tall and pale, had lifted Margaret to her feet and called Black Andrew forward to unfasten the chain. The man, as he did it, bent on one knee and touched Meg's hand with rough lips tenderly.

Still supporting Margaret with his arm, Harry came forward to the foot of the table and faced her ladyship, who turned livid and fell back into the chair from which she had risen.

"For the moment, Madam, you are my prisoner," he said, gravely saluting her. "Others than I must decide your fate, but——"

His calmness restored Isabel suddenly to herself, and she interrupted him with a laugh. "Ha, my Lord, you are late for your wedding. Fetch the lank priest from the dungeon, and let him tie the knot speedily. He buried old Sir William with chains on his hands; you can knock them off for this joyful occasion. Lose no time, I warn you, or the young Italian will run off with the bride. I caught them together in the oratory yonder, but since then I have kept Mistress Meg safe, very safe; you may thank me for it!" she laughed horribly.

"Oh, my God, my God!" Meg sighed, as she leaned against her lover's shoulder.

He made his stepmother no reply, but turned his head

and looked into Meg's eyes, so wildly and strangely, that her lids sank in terror under the gaze. For a moment she thought that he believed the hinted lies. Antonio ! why, God and Our Lady knew how she hated him, but was it needful to tell Harry that ?

"Nay, even if you repent, we will not give her to the doubly traitorous Italian, who betrayed the castle, and helped to kill his master," Lady Marlowe said. "The lass herself may matter little, she is a lifeless piece of pretty flesh ; but Ruddiford matters much. If you have it, Harry, keep it for Lancaster till York drives you out of it. But hark, good man ; you have known from your youth that my advice was clever. Marry the poppet there, and I warn you, it is the loss of the Queen's favour. She loves you, not merely as a partisan, and you loved her, till that fair face distracted you, and made you false to her, and Richard, and me."

As she spoke thus, still seeming mistress of the situation, quite regardless of the evident truth that the castle was lost to her, and that she must answer for her doings to the friends of Sir William Roden, and of Lancaster, she leaned forward on the table, resting her chin on her long white hand, and staring with mocking eyes at the two standing there.

Why did not Harry Marlowe answer her ? Why did he not say in the hearing of them all that whatever might have been in the past, his love and loyalty belonged now to Margaret Roden, and to her alone ? Her tragic, wistful eyes, dark with suffering, were lifted to him in vain. Heavy and silent under some strange oppression, he looked at her no more, and though he held her in his arm, it seemed to be because of her feebleness, not because of his love. Why did he not claim her, his promised wife, who through all these weary weeks had waited and longed for him, who of her own chivalrous generosity had bidden him go back to his Queen, though Margaret of Anjou

needed his help not half so sorely as Margaret Roden needed his love ?

The situation was unbearable. Suddenly it was as if Meg's whole nature burst into flame. With cheeks blushing hotly, and eyes shining, she threw off the miserable deadness that had held her as hopelessly as any iron chain. If Harry's coming meant no more than this, if he was silent before the woman who dared to insult her and reproach him, the woman who should be led away to the dungeon in place of the innocent men she had thrown there,—why, it was time for the mistress of Ruddiford to make her voice heard. With a sudden quick movement Margaret freed herself from Lord Marlowe's arm. "Is this castle mine ?" she said. "Where are my men ? Andrew, are you there ?" and, as he stepped forward, ready and scowling, "Take that woman to the dungeon, and chain her there. Set them free, let her take their place,—traitress, murderess ! I will not have her left free in this house she has ruined. Do you hear me ?"

"Ay, mistress, and will obey you, were she twenty witches in one," Andrew growled in answer, and signing to the men-at-arms at the door, he stepped towards Lady-Marlowe.

She shrank down into her chair, crying out, "Harry, Harry, for your father's sake, let not this girl have her will !"

"Madam," Meg said, and as she leaned over the table towards Isabel, her eyes blazed as Sir William's used to do when he was angry, "this castle you have usurped is mine. It is I who command here, not my Lord Marlowe, nor any other. He is not yet my husband,—mayhap he never will be !"

She looked at Harry with her proud and angry eyes, and forgot everything else, for the moment, in the strangeness of the gaze that met and answered hers. Passion was there, but still more astonishment, and a horrible, mysterious sadness that weighed like a dark

cloud on his wasted features. It seemed as if he hardly realized all that his stepmother had said, or any words or action of Meg's own. He muttered something, and in spite of herself she bent to hear. "Heavens, my poor love! The three straws—how knew you of that? And you are angry,—but I could do no other. To him we owe it that I now stand here. Trust in God,—and in me!"

"He is mad, indeed he is mad!" Meg thought with horror as these incomprehensible words fell upon her ear. "The prison at King's Hall has truly driven him crazy. Ah, they all said it! And I, wicked maid, was doubting him." She looked hard at him. "He loves me as ever," she said to herself, "but his poor mind is diseased."

With a quick, passionate movement, forgetting where they were and all the wild eyes watching them, she flung herself on Harry's neck and hid her face; then lifting it, still with no thought but of him, her lips met his in a long, clinging kiss. Again and again he kissed her, almost lifting her from the ground and holding her as if his arms would never let her loose again. At last, with a gentle authority, he set her down, and smiled upon her with a lingering look; still sad, but a new exaltation had taken the place of the despairing oppression of a few minutes before. "We will cheat Fate, Meg, and her straws," he said softly. "You have given me a right that I will never resign, let come what come may!"

In these few minutes the clamour and tumult without in the castle had gone on growing louder and wilder, and now the stairs and gallery that led to Lady Marlowe's lodging resounded with the tramp of feet, and a number of armed men crowded into the room. Jasper Tilney was there, and several of his Fellowship, and among them they carried the white and feeble form of Sir Thomas Pye, wasted with the fever that had seized him in the black depths of the dungeon.

Margaret Roden awoke, trembling, from her short rapturous dream, to see Jasper Tilney standing beside her, eager and fierce, while his companions, even while they occupied themselves with bringing the old priest in, all stared wildly upon her, the lady of the castle, the object for so long of their chief's ambition and desire. They looked forward to an exciting struggle, for, knowing nothing of the bargain Antonio had made, they flattered themselves that Jasper would not easily give up the prize for whose sake he had kept Lord Marlowe in prison so long.

Jasper himself might very well have witnessed the little scene which made Meg's own followers smile, for she and Harry had alike forgotten that they were not alone in the world together; but as it was, he came in, and marched up to them, just as Meg was listening, blushing and puzzled, half in despair, half in exquisite joy, to the last words of her mysterious lover. Still, there was that in the manner of each, as they stood side by side, which quite justified jealousy in any other pretender to Mistress Roden's hand.

Jasper bowed to her; but though many months had passed since he had seen her, and had heard his dismissal from Sir William Roden, his longest look now dwelt on Harry Marlowe. "Honour, my Lord!" he said, with an angry smile. "Remember the three straws."

Meg looked in wonder from one to the other. "What say you of straws? You, too, are you——" She would have said "crazy," but checked herself.

"She knows," Harry said quickly. "You do not? then, fair lady, why did you doubt that you were mine? I thought some witchcraft had told you——"

Meg waved her hand and shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"I know nothing of your witchcraft," she said. "Straws,—they fly before the wind, and show where it blows from. Silly, helpless things, why do you talk

of them ! Ah, dear Sir Thomas ! But why bring him here, to this hateful room ? Good men, take him up again, take him to my tower. I will have him and tend him there, for he is sorely ill. Ah, nurse, this is a joyful day ! There, they take him up ; show them whither to carry him ! ”

All the eyes in the room followed Margaret's ; all the ears listened to that clear young voice commanding, with the new thrill in its tones which those weeks of experience and suffering had given it. The men turned away from everything else to crowd round the old priest as he lay half unconscious, but smiling faintly as the child of his heart leaned over him and laid her cold fingers on his forehead. The rough Fellowship muttered admiration ; the Ruddiford men, who loved Sir Thomas, growled at his plight in angry sympathy ; even Black Andrew was distracted.

Only Lord Marlowe was aware that the high chair at the table, in front of which the Ruddiford papers and deeds lay heaped in confusion, was empty ; her ladyship was gone. He did not move, or cry to the men to follow her. A woman who shrank from no crime to further the cause of him who, as Harry too late realized, she considered her king, she was yet the widow of his father, and had been for years, to all appearance, a good stepmother to him. She was young Dick's own mother, too, and he loved the Popinjay. If he had known of that letter to Jasper, burnt by Alice, hinting broadly at his own death, Harry Marlowe would not have acted otherwise. It was not in his nature to avenge himself or any one else upon a woman.

Lady Marlowe slipped from the room into her bed-chamber, and muffled herself in a cloak and hood, without word or sign to the frightened women huddled there. She escaped by the door behind the hangings through which Meg and Dick had got away some days before, and descending the staircase in the wall, found herself in the outer barbican, from which, as she knew

very well, having studied every inch of the ground, she could reach the town by steps and avoid the gate and the shouting crowds pressing in and out of it.

In the corner she had thus reached everything was dark and quiet under the midnight sky and the great shadows of the towers ; in the distance was a crackling of bonfires, a flashing of torches, the loud voices of thronging men. From the church-tower in the town, seeming right overhead though several streets away, there broke a sudden deep clanging of joy-bells.

The Ruddiford men who had crowded into the castle were crowding back into the town, leading with them the two popular worthies, Simon and Timothy, or rather carrying them shoulder-high in triumph ; though wasted by prison and hardship, the good men had borne their trial better than Sir Thomas, who was of weakly frame. With cries of " A Lancaster ! a Lancaster ! Down with York ! Death to murderers ! " the worthy folk of Ruddiford pranced along ; old and young, there was no man, scarcely a woman or a child, in bed that night.

Isabel crept along shivering, with set teeth and staring eyes in the darkness, listening to the rejoicings over the men she had condemned to die. She was afraid to go on into the town. Her plan, if she had any, was to find one or two of her own men,—provided there were any still alive after the surprise and storming of the castle—to get hold of horses and escape into the country. Once free of these accursed walls, the danger would be less. She was a splendid horse-woman ; no fatigue or failing for her ; the danger was that she would tire out her companions before they reached the Yorkist camp.

She waited in the shadow, under the black corner of wall. When that crowd of clamouring fools was passed, she said to herself, she would slip across the road and make her way towards the stables and the bridge-gate, if not outside, then inside the walls.

It was a dangerous attempt, but she was desperate. She, the murderer of Sir William, betrayed, as she felt sure, by her tool, Antonio, what chance had she at the hands of all these men ?

Even as she waited, tall and muffled, hardly visible there in the black shadow against the wall, a man with light steps came springing from the way of the gate, and was close upon her before she was aware of him. Pressing up to the wall, her white face and hands hidden against the hard stones, she might have escaped his notice but for a sudden pant of the breath, angry and quick, but also for the fact that he was watching for her.

Antonio had returned to the room, after stowing away her poisoned dagger and making some private arrangements of his own. He found them all following like sheep in the train of Mistress Meg and those who were bearing away the Vicar to her tower. Lord Marlowe and Jasper Tilney were talking apart, but their eyes, too, were following her. With flushed face and streaming locks she moved and spoke like a young queen, and no man there, it seemed, could see or think of any other creature or thing. Antonio looked, and smiled, with fire smouldering in his dark eyes. It was true ; she had never been more beautiful, and in an hour or two she would be his, his entirely, his eternally, his slave, his queen.

"What have you done with my Lady ? " he whispered to Black Andrew, staring like the rest.

The man-at-arms started and looked round, open-mouthed. "The devil ! She's gone !" he muttered.

"The devil is gone, you may say, the devil in form of woman. Nay, hold thy peace ; she has escaped by the bed-chamber. I will slip round and meet her ; she will not pass so quickly into the town. Bring a couple of men to the town-gate ; I shall be ready for you."

"Mistress Margaret ordered me to carry her to the dungeon,—and then all these fellows came in with

Sir Thomas—and then there were passages with my Lord—and I know not how——”

“Bestir yourself,—she shall not escape,” Antonio said, and vanished again.

And now, in this byway leading from her private staircase to the gate, almost on the very spot where he expected to meet her, he found her hiding against the wall. He laughed a little, discovering her; this additional revenge had been wanting to his triumph. Standing still before her, he said, “Madam, which way do you go?”

She turned round suddenly, and faced him like a creature at bay. “What is that to you? I go where I please,” she said.

“Nay,” said Antonio, “the lady of this castle has ordered you to the dungeon. Her men are even now searching for you, Madam.”

“Then you will hide me, Antonio, and help me to escape,” she answered boldly. He was silent, and she could not see his face, so that this quietness gave her a moment’s encouragement. She held out both her hands to him. “You were false to me, but I pardon you,” she said, and her voice trembled a little; it was hard for a proud woman to plead with him even so far. “I tell you, Antonio,” she said, “you are taking the wrong side now. I warn you, the future lies with Edward of York. Listen, you pretended to love me once—I know not what has worked this change in you—nay, listen! Help me away now, and we will come back with an army and rout this noisy troop of clowns and ruffians. You shall have the castle and Margaret Roden too. If Harry Marlowe has married her, we will not spare him; but I think he dare not, because of the Queen. And that Tilney,—sooner than be married to him, she will throw herself from the top of the tower.”

She spoke very quickly and eagerly, leaning forward; he stood in the gangway, a yard or two from her, watching her every movement as keenly as if

she still had the poisoned dagger hidden under her draperies. When she paused he laughed again. "What, Madam! a beggar's brat from the streets of Naples, a slave, a dog, son of a dog, lowest of mankind? Your authority, as guardian,—will even that suffice for giving Ruddiford and its lady to such an one?"

"Ay, it will, I will make it," she said. "At my prayer, Edward will give you honours, Antonio. Save me now, and you shall have your reward. My salvation on it, I will not cheat you."

He stood perfectly still. The distant tumult went on. Black Andrew and the men might be near, but he could not hear them. The situation pleased him; the vengeance was fine; his satisfaction went on growing. For the next moment, with a muttered word, "Nay, if I must," she was on the pavement at his feet, clasping his knees and praying passionately, "Sweet Antonio, those insults,—dost not know how a woman is most angry with him she loves best? What does the past matter? I will make you the noblest and richest young man in England, as you are the bravest and most beautiful. My dear love always, no matter what dull English girl you take to wife! But you shall have her, you shall have this Meg that all you men fancy. I have full authority; I have the will which gives it, and no one can take it from me. Now save me, because your success depends on me, Antonio."

"You have the will,—where?" Antonio said sharply.

"In a pouch under my gown," she said, "I have not parted from it since that night."

"Rise up," he said, "and give it to me."

Lady Marlowe hesitated. "What use is it to you?"

"Madam," Antonio replied coldly, "you will obey me."

She rose slowly to her feet, with the horrible knowledge that her humiliation was wasted. While, with

shaking hands in the darkness, she felt for the roll of parchment, he laughed again and said : " I need no help from you. Do you believe it was for nothing that I brought my Lord and Master Tilney into the castle ? Nay, I shall have my reward from them, not from you. Will or no will, this is not a time to wait for your authority."

" What madness are you talking ? " she said. " With what reward can they satisfy you ? "

" With the reward I desire. Shall I tell you all ? They have sworn to draw lots with me for the prize,—Mistress Roden and Ruddiford. Madam, if I fail to win the prize, you may call me fool and blockhead as well as beggar's brat and dog. See you, Madam ? I carve my fortunes for myself ; 'tis the best and surest way. To you I shall owe nothing, will owe nothing, except vengeance for your falseness and insolence to me, and for the cruel death of my old master. You are in my power ; pray no useless prayers, for I hate you. Give me the will. I hear the steps of the guard, searching for you to carry you to the dungeon. Ruddiford folk think, Madam, that you have much to answer for."

She stood fixed for a moment, staring upon him with quick breath. Then she cried sharply, " Villain ! " and flung herself upon him with such sudden force that he was dashed against the opposite wall. He lost his footing and was half stunned for the moment, so that she fled without his instantly following her.

Black Andrew and his men, fierce and strong, but heavy and awkward of movement, were not quick enough to intercept the dark flying figure which darted from the shadows of the side passages into the broader and lighter space near the gate. Through the gate she ran, and along the narrow street, where there were not many people, most of the population having escorted Simon and Timothy to their home. The men came pounding after her, shouting " Murder, murder ! Justice ! Stop the witch, the murderer ! "

She flew down the middle of the street, making for the church where the loud joy-bells were pealing still. As she passed, the mob gathered from lanes and by-ways, but there were very few ; she was hardly visible, her black gown whisking like a phantom through the darkness.

She had well-nigh reached the foot of the church-steps, the men-at-arms being many yards behind, when a boy at the entrance of an alley took up a large stone as she passed, and threw it at her, striking her full on the side of the head. She ran on a pace or two, then fell crashing down on her face on the stones, almost in the shadow of the church-door.

The men came up, Antonio following them. They lifted Lady Marlowe, and laid her on the steps ; their handling was not tender, for they knew that she had murdered their old master, neither was it barbarous. But this made no difference to the woman who lay there, her white face strained and awful in the torch-light, for the blow from the stone had killed her instantly.

The old priest of King's Hall had been standing at the west door and had seen it all. He came forward with authority. "The woman was seeking sanctuary," he said. "Sinner as she may have been, she is a woman, and dead. It is not fitting that she should lie there. Lift her into the porch, and may God have mercy on her miserable soul !"

Chapter XX

THE THREE STRAWS

THE pale light of that February dawn rose quietly over Ruddiford. It may be that Lady Marlowe's sudden and awful fate had the effect of stunning the men ; it may be that every one was tired out, mind and body ; in any case, a strange stillness throughout castle and town succeeded to the turmoil and noise of the last few days. The standard of Lancaster hung in heavy folds once more upon the keep, side by side with the Roden colours. Her ladyship's men, those of them who had escaped in the surprise, humbly made their submission and begged for mercy from their rightful master. Rival houses were not much to them, nor the colour of a rose, so long as they were warmed and fed and had a Lord to follow.

Their mistress's body was not yet stiff and cold, when they were grinning over a heavy breakfast under the stern eyes and muttered growls of Master Tilney and Black Andrew, both obeying Lord Marlowe against their own judgment, which would have been to make an example of all these mercenary traitors. Murderers, too, in will they were, if not in deed, for how narrowly the good Vicar and his companions had escaped them ! They would have found short shrift in the town, if the men there had had the handling of them ; and Jasper Tilney did not scruple to tell them so.

But, for the present, Lord Marlowe was the one authority. Mistress Margaret had shut herself up in her own rooms, with Dame Kate and her maid, and seemed to think of nothing but tending the Vicar, who lay sick to death, as it appeared, his small remains of strength ebbing from hour to hour. Before Margaret followed those who carried him helpless to

her tower, she had turned and said to Harry, in the hearing of them all : " The command is yours, my Lord. You will hold the place for my grandfather, for me, for the King. My men will obey you."

Harry bowed profoundly and accepted the charge. Jasper Tilney frowned, his Fellowship grumbled among themselves, but no one made any open resistance. It was known, besides, that Lord Marlowe was one of the executors of Sir William's will ; and the command of Ruddiford could scarcely have been given to his worthy colleagues.

After Lady Marlowe's death, after she had been carried into the priest's house and laid on a bed, and after Harry, pale, with fixed eyes and thoughts wrapped in this new horror, had hurried down from the castle in the twilight of dawn to see for himself and to give his orders there, Antonio slipped back to find the new rule established. Coming up with Jasper Tilney stalking round the defences with dark brows of heavy discontent, Antonio looked into his face and laughed.

" So ! times have changed," he said. " The captive has become the master, the master, the obedient watch-dog. Who would not joy to live in such a world of wonders ? "

" Call you me dog ? Dog yourself ! " replied Jasper. " Another word, and I fling you over the wall into the river."

The threat did not seem terrifying. Antonio laughed again ; he was too triumphant to be angry.

" Pardon, Master Tilney ; I had no wish to offend," he said. " What does it matter to you or to me, this little power with which my Lord clothes himself ? We are equal with him. A turn of Fortune's wheel this very day, and you or I may stand where he stands but—even nearer the throne."

Jasper did not answer at once. They were standing on the ramparts, looking over the slow river, just beginning to glimmer grey in the dawn, and the fields of mist where willows like wandering ghosts shadowed

the morning paleness. Beyond these, miles away, lay King's Hall, and the squire stared gloomily towards his home.

"Ay," he said, "but you mistake, Antonio, if you think that game of silly chance will bring advantage to you or to me, however it may turn. I was within an ace just now of ordering the horses and riding home,—why stay here to dance at another Marlowe wedding? But there seemed a stroke of work to be done in ridding Ruddiford of Yorkists. However, whereas I should have strung up her ladyship's band of rascals in a row, my Lord forgives them freely. He will repent, maybe; anyhow, 'tis no affair of mine. But I tell you, we may as well be off, you and I, before your cursed lot-drawing as after it. I tell you again, young man, if you win, I shall kill you,—but you won't. And if I win, my Lord is something between the maddest of fools and the truest of gentlemen, but I doubt him enough of either to give her up, against her will, even for the honour that may lie in a straw. But I shall not win." He paused, staring grimly into the mist. "Would she marry me," he said, "if I won her three times over, or killed the man she loves? If I thought so,—but nay, she is no more the child that old Sir William used to dandle on his knee. I might as well ask St. Margaret in the church window to step down and marry me. And as for you,"—his low laugh revealed inexpressible depths of negligent scorn.

The tone brought a touch of colour to Antonio's pale cheek. But he smiled. "You are too down-hearted and mealy-mouthed," he said. "You threaten to kill me, but 'tis an even chance that I may kill you, if by chance you draw the prize. And why should we give her up to Lord Marlowe? What has her will to do with the matter? The trial is no mockery. You swore to me, both of you, that you would abide by it. We may quarrel afterwards; but if I pull the longest straw, Master Tilney, neither you nor my Lord nor any bolts and bars nor angels nor devils will keep my prize

from me. Ay, you may take the castle if you will, and share all the estates and riches between you. If I live I will have her,—my bride,—and I will carry her away out of this muddy England to a country where the sun shines,—to a land of joy,—joy for me—ah ! ”

He drew a long breath, smiling. Jasper turned his fierce eyes upon him.

“ If you live—my fine fellow—but you won’t live,” he said. “ Failing him or me, your bride, as your insolent lackey’s tongue dares to call Mistress Roden, would find a knife to stab you with.”

“ I will run my risk,” Antonio said, and slipped away with flushed cheeks and dark eyes dancing. The companionship of Jasper Tilney on the high rampart was neither pleasant nor safe ; his hand kept fumbling with his sword-hilt. Antonio’s swift feet carried him to the lower door of Margaret’s tower. There Fortune helped him in his plans, by bringing Dame Kate scrambling hastily down the stairs on her way to the kitchen. He snatched at her cloak and stopped her, asking how the Vicar fared. She, knowing no reason for distrust, answered him fully and frankly, and then, on her side, began eagerly questioning him as to the death of Lady Marlowe. She held up her old hands in thankfulness that Providence had delivered her precious lamb from such a guardianship.

Antonio would not dwell on that subject. It was past ; the woman was dead ; the only creature who could match him in craft and boldness, the only one, he believed, who could spoil his life and step in between him and the object of his passionate desire. He had no thoughts to spare for her now, no time to rejoice in his freedom ; the future demanded all his wit and power. The absent hurry with which he answered her questions annoyed Dame Kate a little, and reminded her of her own claims. Every one seemed to forget that her bold venture, not so many hours ago, had shown the besiegers the way into the castle. She had had no reward, scarcely even thanks, in spite of

Antonio's promises ; and now she began to grumble, and to remind him how she had risked her old bones,—aching now, she swore to him, worse than they had ever ached before. That ducking in the chilly stream had been comfortless enough to finish off an old body, let alone hours of wakefulness and starving. And was she to have nothing for it ? Then my Lord and Master Tilney were a couple of ungrateful rogues.

“Patience, Dame,” said Antonio. “Sure they have enough to do to-day, without thinking of you. I'll jog their memories when the right time comes. But you, too, you owe some thanks to him who pulled you out of the Ruddy. An I had not been there, where would you be now ? Tumbling and washing down the stream, like a dead rat in the gutter. What do you owe me for that, dame ? ”

“Nay, good thanks and a kindness, when there's time to do one,” the old woman answered with a chuckle.

“You might do me one to-day,” Antonio said. “Come, don't turn away,—you have known me long——”

“And whipped you before now, Master Tony,” said Dame Kate. “Little wicked foreign sprite as you were, with your black eyes and cream skin—'twas ever hard to refuse you—there, hands off——” for Antonio slipped his arm round her solid waist, and hurriedly kissed the apple-cheeks under the wings of her cap.

Then, before letting her go, he whispered a wonderful romance in her ear. He told how he was riding with two of Jasper Tilney's Fellowship from King's Hall, and how they found a fine gold chain lying in the road, and how he saw it first, but the others were ready to fight him for it, and how they agreed to keep the peace then, as they were riding to take the castle and avenge Sir William, but to draw lots for the chain as soon as their work was done. He knew they would cheat him if they could, he said, though they called

themselves gentlemen ; and here she agreed with him. He laughed as he told her his plan, and being a woman of adventurous spirit, and of no very strict principles, she entered into his little plot and promised to help him, on condition that he would jog Lord Marlowe's memory as to the debt the besiegers owed her.

" You do not think it will be a sin, Master Tony ? " she asked rather anxiously.

" What sin ? The chain is rightfully mine, I tell you. 'Twas I who saw it first ; the others tried to rob me. 'Tis a just act you are doing, good dame, helping a man to come by his own. If your conscience be sore afterwards, confess to the Vicar—if he lives, or to Parson Curley—he'll shrive you the more easily."

" Ah ! And what would Mistress Meg say ? " the old woman muttered doubtfully.

Antonio paused a moment. Had Dame Kate looked at him then, she might have been warned to avoid him and all his plots. But he said, with a low laugh : " What can your nursling have to say to such a little matter ? She has greater things to think of, and greater men than the poor secretary."

" That is very true, Master Tony, for since the night Sir William died, she has not breathed your name."

He still smiled, murmured some foolish word in her ear, and kissed the old face again ; then they parted for the time, she trotting on giggling to the kitchen.

A few hours later, Harry Marlowe came striding back alone from the house by the church, where his dead stepmother was lying. It was like the man, to honour Isabel in death as if she had really been the good and loyal woman his father had believed her. As to her guilt in the death of Sir William Roden, that must be inquired into. At present he had no one's word for it but that of the young Italian, in whom he placed no credit at all. He listened with downcast eyes to the opinion of Simon and Timothy Toste, whom he had summoned to wait upon him. They, trembling half from exhaustion of body, half from anxiety

of mind and the nervous strain of their narrow escape from violent death at her ladyship's hands, were not likely to take a favourable view of her doings in the past ; he saw that they believed the worst.

He gave his orders shortly and sternly. The body was to be embalmed. It was to lie here, in the priest's house (for he would not offend the folk of Ruddiford by removing it into the church) till a funeral procession could convey it home to Swanlea. Nuns from the neighbouring Abbey were to watch it night and day ; a priest was to say litanies ; candles were to burn round the bed where it lay. Messengers were to be sent at once to find Richard Marlowe, wherever he might be, and to call him to his mother's burial. Harry sat down and wrote tender letters, more than one, to the young brother who had ridden out into the world with his gay bride, careless of trouble and innocent of crime.

The will, a roll of parchment, lay upon the table. Harry handed it to Timothy Toste. "Keep that, Master Attorney, till you are asked for it. Now go, all of you, let me alone for a time."

He knelt down and prayed, and looked for a long time on the face of the dead woman, beautiful, spiritual, stately as it had never been in life. After this he left her to the care of little Simon, and returned to the castle.

He had given no order to stop the ringing of the bells, and they were still shaking the air with triumphant clash and peal as he marched through the gate, the guards saluting him, and up the broad stone-paved way to the inner courtyard. He walked fast, looking on the ground, with stooping shoulders and absent eyes, his cap pulled forward, his hair in dishevelled curls, pale from his captivity, worn by the late sleepless nights and straining days. He looked more like a half-crazed scholar buried in studious thought than a courtier, a soldier, his Queen's right hand, the lover of a noble girl and the lord of her fate. Was he indeed so much ?

As his long steps turned towards Margaret's tower, one stood bareheaded in his way and said to him : "My Lord ! The three straws, my Lord ! The time has come."

Harry started and stood still. Antonio had not spoken above a loud whisper, and even that seemed to tremble on its way, with a quick catching of the breath that might have meant impatience or fear. But he smiled, showing his white teeth, till the full and solemn gaze of Lord Marlowe's eyes met his, which fell before them ; and then his smile died suddenly.

"Lead on, Sir," Harry said. "Where is Master Tilney ? Let us have done with this foolery."

Antonio was smiling again, even laughing to himself, as he darted on towards the steps leading to the hall. There Jasper Tilney joined them, with a dark flush on his sullen face, and blue eyes that blazed threateningly on the Italian.

But Antonio went swiftly forward, mounting now the low broad staircase that led from the hall to old Sir William's room, with its great window commanding the bridge and the south road. A pale yellow gleam of sunshine lay across the room, dazzling and thick with dust, so that at first the only creature there was invisible ; a crouching figure in the corner of the settle by the fireplace, so swathed in wrappings that one could not tell whether it was male or female, blindfolded with a broad white scarf, holding out, one above the other, stiff old bony fists that clutched three shining straws.

"Our fate hath a rugged outside," Jasper was beginning, when Antonio made him an eager sign to be silent, and coming nearer, said in a whisper : "Surely, Sirs, 'tis your wish to keep this bargain secret from the world ? The hag you see there knows nothing ; she serves me thus for a small reward."

"The Italian is right," Lord Marlowe said.

His manner was absent and careless still. After a

passing glance at the strange object in the corner, his eyes wandered to the window, where, lighted up by sunset glory, he had first seen Meg Roden leaning forth. And in this old room he had asked her in marriage. There, in that great empty chair, Sir William used to sit ; he could see him now, his good blue eyes somewhat foolish, his white and venerable beard. How could a woman—he shuddered, and looked again towards the window.

“A tool of yours, Master Tonio ? I thought as much,” Jasper Tilney was saying. “’Tis very well to be indifferent, but if I am to lose, I will not be cheated.”

Three strides brought him up to the settle. Then he paused, staring fiercely at the figure, which shook under his eyes, though blind-folded.

Antonio smiled ; he had expected something of the kind. “Have a care, sir,” he said softly. “The dame is a vixen, a fury, it may be dangerous.”

“And a witch, hey !” shouted Jasper. “She shall be burnt and you hanged ;” but he shrank back, all the same, from touching her. Who knew that a hand too bold might not be mysteriously withered ? Such things had happened before now.

“I said nothing of witchcraft,” murmured Antonio. “I know a little magic of my own country. Did I choose to be dishonest, I need not ask the help of any old woman in England. Come, will you draw ?”

Lord Marlowe stepped forward with outstretched hand.

“Your pardon, not so fast,” said Jasper quickly. “Open thy hand, gammer ; show us these straws of thine. I will be sure there is no foul play.”

The old blindfolded woman muttered something between her teeth : “Here’s a coil about a piece of a chain !”

Antonio first frowned, then laughed, looked at the others and touched his forehead. “A machine, masters, a mere machine, a holder of straws.”

He was shivering from head to foot with impatience. But Jasper was not to be hurried, and Lord Marlowe stood by, looking on dreamily, as if the matter was no great concern of his. Jasper drew his dagger, and touched the woman's hand with the flat of the cold steel.

"Ah, villain!" she cried out sharply. "Master Tony, you swore I should come to no harm."

But her fingers opened wide, and Jasper, with a fierce smile caught the three straws as she dropped them.

"Keep still, dame, all's well, no one will hurt you, only keep still," Antonio muttered hastily, for the old hands were fidgeting towards the scarf that covered the eyes.

Jasper laid out the three straws on his broad palm, and held them towards Lord Marlowe. They were of unequal length, but otherwise appeared exactly alike. He took up each separately, the shortest, the next, the longest, and examined them with a keenness that made Antonio's lips grow white. Neither of the men looked at him. Lord Marlowe, having glanced at the straws, turned his head again towards the window.

"The longest, then, is the prize," said Jasper. His eyes with a bold stare seemed to seize and hold Antonio's, and lifting the long straw to his lips, he drew it slowly from end to end along them; then he laughed and gave up the three into the Italian's eager hand.

"Nay, sir, you accuse me of cheating, but what is that?" said Antonio, reddening angrily; and then, while Jasper watched him, he took the end of his own scarf and carefully dried the damp straw.

Both young men leaned forward, and it was Antonio, Jasper watching him keenly, who replaced the three straws in the old woman's hand, then bade her turn them about several times and close her fists upon them. When this was done, no ordinary eyes could have spied any difference between them.

“And why all this delay?” Lord Marlowe asked, waking from his dream suddenly. “Draw, and let the matter end.”

The deep music of his voice, so different in tone and accent from those of the other men, made the old woman start and tremble. Antonio, standing close beside her, let his fingers close upon her wrist; the grip was a sharp warning to be still.

“Which first?” said Jasper, turning to Lord Marlowe. “How decide?”

“It matters not,” Harry answered.

He looked at Antonio, but there was nothing to be read in those dark inscrutable eyes. Was it suggestion, witchcraft, Italian magic, that made him add quickly, “The youngest”: then under his breath he added “God will provide.” He waved his hand towards the young Italian with a slight gesture so high, so scornful, that Antonio shrank and set his teeth. It seemed that Harry’s faith in the justice of Fate, the kindness of Providence, raised him above all fear and suspicion.

“Right, my Lord,—say the meanest,” said Jasper Tilney, and he began to play with his sword-hilt, while Dame Kate, still fast in Antonio’s grasp, trembled still more and would have risen, had it been possible.

“Now,” said Antonio. “Now my good patron, Saint Antony of Padua!” He drew one straw from the three, not without, as it seemed, an instant’s difficulty, so tight was it gripped in the hollow of the old Dame’s thumb.

Lord Marlowe waved to Jasper, and he took the next; his colour faded and he bit his lips; it was certainly shorter than that he had held in his hand before. Lord Marlowe stepped forward and took the last; it was shorter still.

Antonio faced the two men for a moment of terrible silence.

“Nay, nay!” Jasper said viciously. “Now take

your choice, Master Tonio ; renounce what you have gained, or—" he drew his sword with a sudden clatter,—“ you die ! ”

“ I have your oath, sir ! ” cried Antonio. “ You swore to abide by this trial,—you too, my Lord,—you are an honourable man,—I appeal to you. The prize is mine,—I have drawn it,—I have it fairly, and no man shall force me. No, Jasper Tilney, leader of ruffians, you are not master here. I,—I am master,—bride and castle are mine. My Lord, you cannot gainsay it.”

“ Do not touch him, Master Tilney,” Harry said. “ Leave this quarrel to me. You will fight with me first, foreigner, and then, if you have the best of it, with Master Tilney. If I honour you so far as to meet you in single combat, a low-born man, he for my sake will do the same. I will ask this favour of him for you.”

“ I thank you, my Lord,” cried Antonio, laughing. “ But why, forsooth, should I fight with any man ? I have won, and fairly. Your honour should drive you to take my side against this man who threatens me, who will not keep his word. Go ! I defy you both ! I will drive you from Ruddiford.”

Drawing the dagger at his belt, he leaped out of Jasper's way, and the blow of the sword missed him. He dodged his attacking enemy round Sir William's great chair, while Jasper, with a sudden roar of laughter, called aloud to him to stand and be killed.

“ Patience, patience, Master Tilney ! Fate is against us ; we must meet her in another way. Do not murder the wretched boy,” cried Harry Marlowe.

Dame Kate groaned aloud in the background. Terrified by the noise, and by finding that Antonio had deceived her, though she hardly yet realised all that hung upon the drawing of those fateful straws, she scrambled out of her mufflings and tore the bandage from her eyes. “ Oh, my Lord ! Sirs, Sirs, what is all this coil about ? Mary, Mother, have mercy ! ”

she cried, wringing her hands. "Alack, how have I been misused and cheated, a poor innocent dame! Master Tony, thou deservest the dungeon for this. But stop, stop, Master Tilney, 'tis not a killing matter. My Lord, pardon; will you see bloodshed? Enough, masters, enough! What doth it all mean?"

Antonio went edging, dagger in hand, towards the door, Jasper pursuing and striking at him. The sliding of their feet, the hissing of their quickly-drawn breath, were the only sounds except the groans of the old woman. Suddenly over the misty meadows, echoing back from the distant wall of looming woods, and from the castle walls as it drew nearer, came the loud and shrill blast of a trumpet, and with it quick ears could hear the tramp of many horses and armed men.

"My God! Who is there?" cried Harry Marlowe, and rushed to the window.

He threw the lattice open, and leaned out as Meg had done that evening when he and his little troop rode in over the bridge.

Now a couple of hundred men, splashed from head to foot with the mire of the roads, were advancing slowly from the south, with jingling of bridles, clash of pikes, and tramp of weary feet. There were also pack-horses and country waggons, a number of grooms, and in the midst of all two horse-litters rich with hangings on which the royal arms were blazoned. With the trumpeters who rode in front was the standard of Lancaster, and every man wore in his cap the silver swan, the badge of Edward, Prince of Wales.

From the front of the foremost litter a woman was leaning out, her beautiful worn face lifted, with dark eyes scanning the castle as she drew near. She smiled, seeing the colours on the keep. She was still looking up, smiling, when the bridge gate was set open at a word from the men who rode before her, and advancing on the bridge she suddenly saw the face of a follower she knew and had long missed, gazing

down upon her little army from the window. She snatched a white kerchief from her neck and waved it, crying at the same time to those behind her : " Look up ! See our captive Marlowe, who scarce knows his old friends, so dazed is he by long enchantments."

Her voice reached Harry's ears plainly enough. With a flushed face and eyes full of fire he turned to Jasper and Antonio, who had suddenly forgotten their quarrel at the sound of that trumpet which announced to Ruddiford the coming of royalty.

" It is the Queen ! " he said. " I shall meet you later,"—and dashed from the room.

Jasper Tilney gazed open-mouthed from the window. Leaning on his sword, forgetting for the instant the very existence of Antonio, he lingered thus for a minute or two as the trailing procession crossed the bridge ; then he was roused by a sudden loud clang to remember all, and turning round fiercely, found himself alone with the old woman, still groaning in the corner.

" What wickedness is this ? What lies, what lies ? Ah, my poor lamb, are all these wolves after thee, and has thy poor nurse helped the worst brute of all ? Ah, Master Jasper, do not glare upon me so ! He cheated me ; he told me 'twas a matter of a gold chain, that two of thy Fellowship were to draw the lots with him. Alas, alas, what have I done ? And where are they gone now, and what is this—a new army coming to besiege us ? Alack-a-day ! "

" What, Dame Kate, is it thou ? " said Jasper. " I thought 'twas some wicked old hag from the worst hovel in the town. But I've no time to waste with thee." He was striding towards the door, when something she said arrested him. " He knew, said'st thou ? He knew which straw to take ? But how ? " He stooped and picked the straws from the floor.

" This—the longest—you say he knew where you held it—he marked it too ? but how, where ? What—ay, by Heaven, I see—a dint of a fingernail, no more

than the print of an eyelash. The incarnate liar and devil! Do you know what he has done? He has taken the prize,—your mistress, Dame, whom you should have guarded with your life. I have a mind to chop off those hands of yours,—they deserve it. Now he *shall* die, and my sword shall have no mercy. Where is he now? Gone to her? And her fine lord of a lover flown away to his Queen? No Queens for me!”

As Jasper spoke he was wrenching hard at the door, but it would not open.

“The Queen! And our kitchen all in disarray!” cried Dame Kate. “Sakes alive, Master Tilney, be we locked in? That is his doing,—ay, now I think on’t, I heard him turn the key.”

Jasper beat and kicked on the door, swearing furiously.

Down in the court and the hall below a tide of noise was swelling; the bells had struck up again, and all Ruddiford, at the sound of the trumpet, was pouring with shouts from the town to the castle gates. For the litters were set down at the end of the bridge, and from them stepped not only a woman, beautiful, majestic, through all her misfortunes holding men’s hearts with the magic of her smile, and throughout her unhappy career the heroine of the North and the Midlands, but a slender man, dark-eyed, nervous, sad, shivering under his wrappings, and a boy of seven years old, with golden curls flowing on his shoulders.

Thus Harry Marlowe, the Queen’s man, governor for the moment of Ruddiford Castle, kneeling on his knees at the bridge gate, received King Henry the Sixth, Queen Margaret of Anjou, and Prince Edward of Wales, as they fled from south to north again after the short-lived triumph at St. Albans.

Chapter XXI

THE FIRST STRAW

THE music of the bells so filled all the air, that the other sounds of the royal arrival only faintly reached Margaret's tower on the eastern side of the castle. From its windows the bridge was hidden, neither could the great court and the stairs be seen, where Lord Marlowe was now welcoming the King and Queen. The distant trumpets set the waiting-maids wondering, and as Dame Kate was not there to keep them in order, they slipped down one by one to the inner court to find out what was happening. It was better to do this, they argued, than to disturb their mistress as she watched Sir Thomas on what they all believed was his death-bed. If there was really something to tell, then they could go to her ; in the meanwhile curiosity led them, one and all, to start on this journey of discovery, leaving their mistress unattended.

As the last girl crossed the threshold, she was met and pushed aside by Master Anton, springing like a wild animal through the door.

"Ah, have a care ! What news ? Whither so fast ?" she cried, as he dashed past her.

"Go and find out," he said, and leaped on up the stairs, laughing wildly.

The girl lingered and looked after him. "'Tis something joyful," she said to herself. "Another victory for the Red Rose ? He bears the news to Mistress Meg. Well, we have had sorrow enough, and maybe this is something to bring the Vicar to life again. They have all left me behind,—haste,

haste!" and she scampered over the damp stones of the small court, dived under a black archway and flew in pursuit of her companions.

High up in the tower the old priest lay in his bed, conscious so far that he knew where he was and recognised the dear child who watched and tended him, but so weak from the fever which the damp and starvation of the dungeon had brought on, that he could scarcely speak or turn or lift his hand, or use his brain to think reasonably. His sheets and pillows were fine and soft, his curtains and the coverlet thrown over him were of rich cream-coloured silk embroidered with red roses. All this was in strange contrast with the ascetic hardness and simplicity of his own home life. But when he touched the coverlet with wasted fingers, and looked up at Meg with eyes of distressed remonstrance, she leaned over him and said, trembling: "Dear Sir Thomas, my grandfather died without my care. His old friends are all that is left to me. Lie still, I beg you, and let me have my way. There is peace, you know. Lord Marlowe commands, and we are safe, for she, they tell me, she, the arch-enemy——"

His lips moved. "She is dead?"

Meg bowed her head and turned away. The Vicar's eyelids drooped and his lips went on moving. Looking back, she knew that he was praying for the miserable soul who had brought such harm and sorrow to Ruddiford.

For Meg herself the news of Lady Marlowe's death had come as the first real gleam of light in the dark tragic labyrinth she had trod ever since Christmas Eve. That evil presence gone, Harry near and faithful, it seemed as if there might be some good and joy in life after all.

She moved to the window, and looked out into the tree-tops where rooks were building; a breath of spring was stealing across the meadows; the distant trumpets were ringing out triumphantly;

but she heard only the rooks and the bells. "Why," she asked herself for the hundredth time, "why did I at first believe in the Lady Isabel? Nay, almost love her—those dark eyes smiling, that stately look, those long soft hands!"

A slight sound from the bed made her look that way. It seemed that Sir Thomas wished to speak; there was a light in his face, almost a smile. Unconsciously, as Meg afterwards thought, she must have asked her question aloud.

"My child," he whispered, "you knew not wickedness. Alas, like an Angel of light—but do not, for all that, lose faith——"

Even as she leaned over him, trying to catch the indistinct murmurs with which he strove to keep Heaven about her, this child of his love who had been so roughly driven out of Eden, even at that moment Antonio came to the door with noiseless feet, opened it without knocking, was beside her before she knew, his bold hand touching her arm, her waist, his eyes full of triumph which, when she turned with a sudden start to meet them, made her flush crimson and then turn pale.

She stepped back, instantly freeing herself, and said very coldly: "What do you here, Antonio? I have not sent for you; I do not need you. Begone at once."

"Patience, fair lady," he said. "I have news for you. Hear it, and know that you can no longer order me away. Your three lovers, sweet Mistress Meg, have drawn lots for you, and poor Antonio,—even he, your lover from childhood,—has gained the prize. So now,—I will not even ask you for the kiss you refused me a few days since, till I have made sure of what is my own. Cheer up, Sir Thomas; is there life enough in you to join our hands in marriage instantly? Do you say no? A prick of this dagger might rouse you to sit up in your bed."

Sir Thomas gasped, with wide-open eyes of horror.

"God and His saints protect us! What wickedness is this?" he muttered breathlessly.

Meg stood at bay, like a beautiful living creature attacked by wolves, or devils in form of men. "You have drawn lots? You are lying to me," she said. "It is a trick of your false tongue. You, and——"

"I and Jasper Tilney, and Mad Marlowe," he said, and laughed. "We made the bargain before we took the castle. I showed them the way in, and they gave me my chance of the reward we all desire. We drew for the longest of three straws, and it has fallen to me. Tilney threatened to kill me, attacked me with his sword, but I escaped him. As for my Lord, he is a very just gentleman, and trusts in Providence."

It seemed as if Meg was turned to stone. Antonio's sneer was at first nothing; the fact was all. That babble of straws between Harry Marlowe and Jasper Tilney, which had made her believe that captivity had shaken her dear lover's wits,—this frightful truth was its foundation. She remembered now every word that he had said last night, remembered the agonised look of remorse and heart-wrung pity with which he had told her that he could do no other, that some debt of honour must be paid, and bade her trust in God and in him. It was not madness then; Harry Marlowe had actually ventured their lives,—hers and his—on the length of a straw. And the Powers he trusted in had failed him; he had tempted God, she swiftly thought, and was punished; but where was he now? It was impossible, beyond thinking, that he could give her up, alone and unprotected, into the hands of the Italian. Did he expect her to save herself? Certainly she would do so, if she must throw herself near a hundred feet from the tower window, to be dashed to pieces on the hard stones below; but where was he? And again, with panting breath, she said to Antonio—"Villain, you lie!"

He answered her unspoken thoughts. "Ah! you

will not believe that my Lord cared for you so little ? You think, if the story were true, he would not give you up to me ? You ask why he is not here ? Your eyes ask it a dozen times, looking at the door. See you, fair lady, this mad Marlowe is a very honourable gentleman. He fulfils his part of the bargain. I gave him and Tilney the Castle ; they promised me my chance. That chance has given you and Ruddiford to me. As to that, I care little for Ruddiford. No more mud and fog for you and me, my beautiful. Your mother was Italian, torn from Italy ; your husband shall carry you back there."

It seemed as if she hardly heard him. He quailed before the scorn in her eyes, as she stood, young and slender, but so majestic, her hand resting on the old priest's pillow. Sir Thomas glared upon him with eyes wide and hollow, and lanthorn jaws and cheeks so bloodless that he might have been a dead man already, but for the fiery spirit and soul roused to new life by this presence of victorious evil.

"Where are they ?" Meg demanded. "You say that Jasper Tilney tried to kill you ? I honour him for it. Where is he ! And where then is my Lord ?"

"Jasper ? I escaped from him, I tell you. I locked him in and left him swearing. And,—the last news has not reached the fair lady of Ruddiford ? The lot was scarcely drawn, the straws scarce measured as they lay on our three palms, when a trumpet draws my Lord to the window. Over his shoulder I saw a troop ride in ; I saw a lady wave her handkerchief ; I saw the royal standard of the Red Rose. Queen Margaret has arrived,—I believe King Henry and the Prince are with her,—running away from York,—but yet they make a goodly show. Off hurries my Lord, your precious Marlowe ; I doubt, sweet Meg, the old love may be stronger than the new. Ah, I have touched you ? Come, 'tis better to be first with the little than last with the great. And now, Sir Thomas, you have known us both long. There, let

me lift you on your pillows. Gently, I shall not hurt you, old man, if you obey me. Stand here, Mistress Meg. No book, but he knows his part, or a little sharp argument shall remind him. Rings,—you have one there,—here is mine. Now marry us, Vicar, and quickly.”

Meg stood immovable, only lifting her hand to her head. Was she in her senses? How much more could she bear? Why,—a voice dinned in her brain,—why keep yourself and life for this strange man, content to lose you, forgetting that you need his guardianship, and at this supreme moment following other duties—perhaps willingly—What were the last words, or almost the last, that Harry’s stepmother had said in Meg’s hearing? That the Queen loved him, that he had loved her, till Meg’s fair face distracted him and made him false to her! And now! what said Antonio? the old love stronger than the new?

All the room, Antonio’s beautiful evil face, his eyes that burned into hers, his half-sheathed dagger, swam red before her sight. “False!” she said under her breath; then with a sudden and great effort she made a step towards the door. “The King and Queen have come to Ruddiford,” she said aloud. “The castle is mine; I must receive their Highnesses. I must go; where are my people?”

She was trembling, and tottered slightly as she walked. Antonio stepped in her way, and suddenly seized her in his arms, crying, “No, my adored! First be my wife, and then together to the Queen, if you will,—my prize, my love, my lady!”

For a moment the girl’s senses were almost gone. He held her close and kissed her passionately; then she struggled violently to be free.

“Child of the devil! Satan himself! Let her go, or God’s curse be upon you!” the sick man shrieked, starting up in his bed.

Such supernatural strength seemed suddenly to be given him, that in another moment Antonio would

have been seized and dragged backwards by the bony hands already clutching at his cloak, had not stronger help been clanking with armed tread on the stairs.

Jasper Tilney burst open the door and strode into the room with his sword drawn, followed by several of his Fellowship.

He did not speak a word or ask a question, but caught Antonio by the throat and forced him to his knees. Margaret, suddenly released, fled back to the old priest and leaned trembling, white with rage and horror, against the head of his bed, while he fell back and panted on his pillows, the flame of life in his face dying down into an ashy greyness. For a moment his hard breathing was the only sound in the room.

"I warned thee, Tonio!" said Jasper's deep voice.

"Nay, let me up, let me up," Antonio cried, crimson and choking. "Your hand,—you are killing me! Remember the oath,—your honour,—the straws—ah!"

"Honour! This knave talks of honour," Jasper said, looking first towards the priest and Margaret, then turning towards his companions. "We drew lots; the longest straw was to give the prize, the Ruddiford estates and Mistress Roden's hand in marriage. 'Twas against my will and judgment, for the devil likes his own way in these things. But my Lord Marlowe found 'twas the only way to gain the castle,—some secret entrance this rascal knew. And he made sure all would be well; the lot would fall to himself, or even to me, and then we two men could fight out the matter. I said that if this Antonio pulled the longest straw, I would kill him. I meant it,—but now I mean it a dozen times more, for the villain marked the straw. He was sure of winning—ah, wast thou not, Master Tonio? and so thou didst win. But the poor old dame who helped thee, when she found out the truth, she and I being locked in by thine own craft together, repented and confessed thy

sins and her own. And I am not bound, like a priest, to hold my tongue upon them. So prepare to die, friend Tonio. I will give thee five minutes to confess thy bad life to the Vicar in his bed yonder. Mistress Roden, at your service ; my men will attend you downstairs. Mark you, the second straw was mine."

Margaret collected her failing senses, drew herself erect, met Jasper's gaze, as his voice dropped on the last words, with eyes as proud and fearless as his own. "Silence, Sir!" she said. "I will hear no more of your insulting bargain. I am mistress here, remember. Your friends can escort me to meet the Queen ;" she bowed her head towards the fierce Fellowship crowding about the door. "As to this miserable boy,"—she looked at Antonio, struggling under Jasper's hand—"do not kill him ; but send him away, for I will have him in my house no more."

For the moment her quietness had a strange effect ; the men looked at each other. Antonio seemed suddenly to lose his fighting spirit, and tried to crawl to her feet. Behind the group at the door Dame Kate crept in, sobbing, and Jasper pointed at her as she came. "Ah, Dame ! 'Tis not wise to help a traitor."

"He deceived me, traitor to me as to you !" the old nurse burst out angrily, and made her way round by the bed to her mistress who looked at her with unseeing eyes and said very low : "Come with me, nurse. I must dress to receive the Queen."

The two women passed through into an inner room. Jasper's companions began to mutter among themselves, and he, still holding Antonio, glanced from him to the half-lifeless figure in the bed.

"To thy prayers, Tonio," he said, and dragged him to the priest's feet. "Quick, or the old man will not live to hear thee."

For a moment the Italian pretended to yield to his fate. He hung slackly upon the hand that grasped his collar ; he did not resist ; it was a passive body

that Jasper dragged along the floor. He even groaned something of *pardon* and *mercy*, to which Jasper replied: "Ask mercy of God; you will not have it from men. I am not a pitiful girl, to be touched by your pretty face—dog!"

Antonio leaped to his feet, and with wild-cat swift-ness drove his dagger at Jasper's throat. He just missed his aim, but struck him on the jaw, cutting his cheek so that the blood streamed from it. Jasper cried out sharply with rage and pain. Antonio, free for the instant, hardly knowing whether he had wounded his enemy mortally or not, made a dash for the door. Three of the men standing there caught him and held him fast.

"Ah! would you, my lad? Nay, don't struggle. Not much odds for the like of you, to die with shrift or without it," said one of them.

Jasper snatched a napkin from the old priest's pillow, and held it to his bleeding face. "Here's a pretty mess for my lady's chamber!" he said grimly. "Downstairs with him; make an end of the young devil, as quick and quiet as may be. I follow you. Leonard, Ralph, John, Giles, Lance, stay you here, friends. Attend Mistress Roden to meet their Highnesses. My duty to her,—say a cat has scratched me, and I go to hang it on a tree, or drown it with a stone round its neck. A plague on this cut! one of you fellows must bind it up for me. Here, see to the Vicar. Tell Mistress Roden she will hear more of me. My Lord and I will settle that matter between us."

He strode out of the room. The young fellows he left there nudged each other and laughed at this strange turn of affairs.

They had always known there was something weak at the root of Jasper, though his position, fortune, and desperate daring had made him their leader. It was not the first time he had thrown away his own advantage, and they, as it were, had taken it up and carried it after him.

“Why, he drew the second straw,” they whispered to each other, “and as the villain Tonio cheated, the prize is rightly his. What is he doing? Leaving her free to join that lover of hers, whom he shut up for weeks to keep him out of her way? Leonard, what think you?”

Leonard, the older man, Jasper’s grim and envious lieutenant, stepped back and joined the group. He had busied himself for a few minutes, with hands which could be tender, in settling the Vicar’s pillows and giving him a few drops of cordial. The old man lay with closed eyes, breathing more evenly, but now almost unconscious of what went on around him.

The five men had no fear of his hearing them, as they talked matters over in low tones among themselves. Ralph, John, Giles, and Lance, all strong fellows of fair birth and a certain education, had no doubt or varying opinion as to what ought to be done in Jasper Tilney’s interest. Leonard agreed with them. He saw the difficulties better; he also knew how to surmount them. He thought of several improvements on their first rough plan. The five were still in deep conference when the inner door opened again, and Mistress Roden came back, followed by Dame Kate in red-eyed penitence.

All eyes were fixed on Margaret. The men who had been speaking remained with parted lips; those who had laughed over their plotting became suddenly grave. For the first time in their lives, perhaps, they saw a beautiful girl beautifully dressed, the lady of a castle prepared to receive Royalty.

Margaret’s hair in its rich colour and quantity, wildly streaming before, was now gathered into a gold net; round her lovely throat she wore the pearls her grandfather had given her on Christmas Day. Her gown was of white satin and white fur, laced with silver; her long and heavy girdle was of silver, set with diamonds and pearls. Holding herself very erect, she looked like a young princess about to receive

her lieges. The party of adventurers, who had never seen anything so stately, so exquisite, so cold and strange, stared at her in silence. Lancelot, the youngest and the gentlest, caught his breath. Leonard's stern mouth relaxed, and he rubbed his hands together.

Margaret walked up to the bed and leaned over Sir Thomas, laying her hand softly on his forehead. He smiled faintly and his eyelids trembled. "Dear Sir Vicar," she said, "I have not a black garment in the world, or I would not deck myself so, when I should be mourning for my grandfather. Yet he would have told me,—you know it—to wear my best for the King and Queen. I am going now to wait upon them; these gentlemen from King's Hall will follow me, and Dame Kate will stay here with you. I will come back soon, and Lord Marlowe with me; we will ask for your blessing, Sir Thomas, on our betrothal. Live, live till then!"

Standing again upright, she turned to Leonard, and as she moved, her white gown trailed in the blood on the floor, where it had dropped heavily from Jasper's wound. She did not notice it; almost it seemed as if she had forgotten all that had happened before, the very existence of Antonio, the story of the three straws. She showed no surprise that Jasper and Antonio and several of the men were gone. For a moment, as she looked silently at Leonard, standing square and martial before her, so stony a look came into her lovely wild eyes, so colourless was her face, that he half expected her to fall senseless at his feet.

He spoke, with a rough laugh of admiration. Master Leonard had not even the manners, such as they were, of his birth and time. "By the Lord, fair lady, you might be dressed for a wedding!" he said.

"My own wedding, perhaps," she answered him quietly. "Lord Marlowe is in the castle, and the Queen, my godmother,—what could be more fitting?"

"Ay, mistress, we saw him, your fine Lord, a few minutes since. I'm bound to say he looked a happier

man than when we had him caged in our garret and fed him with what we could spare. A very handsome lady, too, is the Queen. There he knelt beside her, like the best courtier of them all and something more, holding her gracious hand to his mouth like a starved man who wanted to eat it, and she in no hurry to draw it away. There sat King Harry, save his poor half-fledged Grace! Had I been him, I would soon have stopped their cooing and courting."

Leonard hardly knew if she heard him, as he grumbled on. His companions chuckled, except Lance, who frowned, his young heart suddenly touched by the tragic, helpless beauty of Margaret. It seemed that if she heard, she did not choose to understand; not an eyelash moved, not a tinge of colour came, as the words fell on her ears. "Let us go," she said, and stepped towards the door.

The men followed her closely; one or two of them muttered to each other that the pearls were worth more than the maiden who wore them. Leonard turned back as soon as she had passed the door, and with a twist of his hand pulled the embroidered silk coverlet off the sick man's bed.

"I have more use for this than you, father," he said, and shut the door after him without noticing Dame Kate's cry.

Margaret walked on down the stairs, looking straight before her, noticing nothing. She passed the door of a lower room, where two or three of her maidens, having run back to their duty, were waiting huddled with terrified faces. Some horror was happening, they scarcely knew what; they had seen Jasper Tilney, wounded, and men dragging one they thought to be Antonio. They would have clung to their mistress's skirts, had not something in her face, and the fierce looks of the men, kept them back. Leonard, indeed, with the great roll under his arm, pushed them all with one hand into the room, and clanged the door upon them and their idle embroidery frames.

At the foot of the stairs, in a dark place by the door that opened into the small court, there was a slight scuffle, a smothered scream. Two of the men slipped out and ran in quest of horses, to bring them to the place Leonard had appointed. He and the others turned the opposite way, carrying amongst them a figure swathed and muffled from head to feet in long folds of cream-coloured silk, embroidered with red roses.

"Listen, pretty mistress," Leonard growled in his prisoner's ear. "Be still, and we do not hurt you. Scream or struggle, you are gagged and bound. What is that you say? 'Harry, Harry!' Nay, my lass, his lordship is not thinking of you. Be content; we'll find you a better bridegroom. You are his by lot, and King's Hall will give you up to no Harry, as long as his Fellowship are there to stand by him."

The willows by the Ruddy saw strange sights that afternoon, when the mist, stealing again over the marshy meadows, had veiled the yellow wintry sun.

The small river door in the castle wall, by which Antonio had escaped when he went to call help from King's Hall against Lady Marlowe, was cautiously opened again. Three men carried out a woman, who lay in their hands as if dead. Keeping as far as possible in the shadow of the buildings, they brought her across the sluice and the weir. They laid her down by the willows, in a place where a bank of earth hid her, gorgeously wrapped as she was, from the ram-parts and any high windows of the castle.

The rooks cawed and flapped among their new nests, high above in the tall trees, and flew, swaying and floating in the air, over the meadows and back again. The castle was full of the clamour of the Lancastrian troops, and from the town the loud joy-bells kept ringing, while in the hall Queen Margaret looked down smiling into her servant's eyes and said: "But where is Sir William Roden's sweet granddaughter? Where is the young Margaret we held at the font? Nay, my Lord, we heard rumours——"

The willows by the Ruddy saw more men creeping up through the mist from the bridge, leading horses with them, and then Jasper Tilney's Fellowship mounted, and the strong Leonard carried his fainting prisoner slung across his saddle, and so galloped away with her southward, to the house of him who had drawn the second straw.

The willows by the Ruddy saw even more that day, Under their very branches, where they grew close to the water and hung over it, a dead man was washed by. His white face rose out of the muddy stream, as the grass on the bank caught his hair. The willows and the water knew him well. It was not twenty-four hours since he had dashed into the stream at this very place to save an old woman from drowning,—for his own ends, like everything else he did in his own short life. The river had not drowned him, though the cold water now had his young body, strong and beautiful, born under the Italian sun, to play with as it would. His life-blood had ebbed from many wounds with which the Fellowship carried out their leader's threatening.

The boy might have died triumphantly, for there was a smile on his pale lips. He might have died with two thoughts in his unshriven soul,—that the old master, whose life he vainly begged from a worse creature than himself, had loved and trusted him to the end,—and that, fairly or foully, he had snatched one moment's wild joy in the hour of defeat and death—he had kissed his lady.

Chapter XXII

THE SECOND STRAW

MARGARET RODEN came back slowly to the consciousness of life in a gloomy, ill-lighted room, its long latticed window open to the darkness of the night. A fire was smouldering on the hearth under the yawning chimney; a faint rush-light glimmered on the table. She found herself propped up in a tall chair; there was little other furniture, except an enormous bed with long dark curtains that swayed in the wind. An ugly old woman, with the face of a witch, was standing by, trying to feed her from a silver bowl with a large spoon.

"There, my pretty! Open your eyes,—that's well," she grunted. "Swallow some of this good stuff, 'twill warm the cockles of your heart—there!"

But Meg lifted herself in the chair, staring wildly round, and waved the spoon away. "Where am I?" she said; and added under her breath—"Harry, Harry!"

"Nay, we've no Harrys here," the hag chuckled, grinning; "but one young man's as good as another. If you can call for one, you can speak to another; and so I'll e'en do the master's bidding, and fetch him here."

She set down her bowl, and waddled out of the room.

Meg pressed both hands to her brow, and tried to think, to understand. She did not, honestly, know where she was. She could only remember leaving Sir Thomas, the old, faithful friend, his dying eyes

following her as she swept to the door—how, why, where was she going? Ah, to meet the King and Queen. Yes, she still wore the beautiful gown of white and silver; the pearls were still upon her neck. She knew all now, and remembered that Harry Marlowe, in the presence of the Queen, the other Margaret of his adoration, had forgotten her, had left her undefended, to the mercy of the men who had joined him in that odious bargain of the three straws.

A sudden flame burned in Meg's heart, and she knew that she could never forgive Harry for this that he had done. If he felt himself bound to consent to such a means of gaining the castle and releasing her, he should not have left her to bear the consequences; he should not have allowed his love, the lady of Ruddiford, to be claimed successively by a cheat and a ruffian.

Crazy! That was his only possible excuse. Such devotion to the Queen was madness; it could not exist side by side with a real, good love for another woman. The warnings of all the old friends came back to her. Gazing into the dark recesses of this strange room, where the night-breeze howled and the rats clattered behind the wainscot, Meg told herself that all was over, that Harry was dead to her, and she to him.

She now realised that she had been carried away from home, and as her senses returned she knew where she was.

A sound at the door made her turn her eyes that way: she tried to rise from her chair, but her head swam, and she fell back, closing her eyes for an instant. When she opened them again, Jasper Tilney was standing before her.

Never finished or gentle in appearance, the master of King's Hall now looked fierce and terrible enough. His face was wrapped in bandages; his wild blue eyes glared upon Meg defiantly; but his words and actions were milder than his looks. "By all that's holy, you look but ill!" he said. "Has the old dame

waited on you as she should? If not, I'll have her ducked in the river;" and stooping, he pushed a footstool to Meg's feet.

She looked down at him in the dim light, and strangely, suddenly, something in him made her think of Alice, her friend; it made her also remember that this wild being had had a good father and mother, her grandfather's neighbours and friends. Bad as his life had been, unworthy of his ancestors, Jasper Tilney could never quite descend to the level of the men who followed and sometimes led him.

Meg pointed at the smoking silver bowl on the table, and her lips trembled with something like a smile.

"Spare the old dame," she said; "she has done her best."

"But you have not drunk the stuff,—the posset, the broth, whatever it be," he said gruffly.

"I thank you; I cannot swallow it," she answered.

"Ay, nothing at King's Hall is good enough for you."

"It is not that," she said, and stopped; then she went on, with grave eyes fixed on him, "You are hurt, I see."

His face deepened in colour, so far as it could be seen. "'Tis nothing," he said. "Did not they tell you? I left you a message; a cat clawed me, that was all." He tried to laugh and made a grimace. "I was a handsome fellow," he said, "though you may not believe it, for you never looked on me kindly before."

"The wound will heal, but it is very ill bandaged," Margaret said. "Let them bring me hot water and a cloth; I will do it better for you."

He looked at her hard. "For whose sake, Mistress Margaret?"

"For your sister Alice's sake," she answered him.

Jasper tossed his proud head slightly. "Better than nothing! Nay, it is very well, the cut is not

deep. You shall not soil your hands or your white gown."

"It is soiled already. There is blood upon it—look! And yet I am not hurt," she said.

"Mine, I wager," Jasper muttered. "For 'twas not in your presence that—by Heaven," he said aloud, "they told me you were dressed in a wedding gown, and they spoke the truth, I see!"

Meg looked at him calmly. The strange situation did not disturb her young stateliness. She sat upright, with her hands folded; the pearls gleamed softly on her neck. The Fellowship had been in two minds about robbing her of them, but Leonard had discouraged this idea. "Jasper shall give us their value many times over," he said, "when he is master of Ruddiford. Do not take them now, or he will be angry."

"A wedding gown! No wedding gown for me," Meg answered Jasper, and even laughed a little, not merrily.

"What?" he said. "You will not marry him who drew the second straw, not now that you are in his house, in his power, carried off by his Fellowship?"

"And by his orders?"

"No," said Jasper; "no, fair lady, 'tis true, not by his orders. But my fellows are very faithful; no man has better. They judged for themselves. They knew that long ago I asked Sir William Roden for his grand-daughter. He refused me bluntly enough then. Will you refuse me now?"

Meg was silent, so long, with eyes now bent on the ground, that Jasper stared at her in astonishment. At last she looked up. "You ask very strangely," she said. "As for the straws, let me hear no more of them. I am a straw myself, it seems, and made of no more account among you all. You have me here in your power, as you say; with some, that would be a better argument, but not with me, for I fear neither you nor any man. Why do you wish

to marry me, Jasper Tilney? Do you pretend to love me, by chance? Alice used to say——”

Again he tried to laugh, and winced with the pain.

“I cannot say soft things to please you, Mistress Meg,” he said. “I leave that to fine lords and fine gentlemen. Love you? Well, you are beautiful, you are noble-hearted, but,—believe me if you will—I have never loved a woman as you mean. But any man must be proud of such a wife as you; and truly I love your acres of meadow and forest, and your snug little town, and your high castle with its banner waving, so proud, like a queen of the country-side. All that is what I have coveted, and all that you can give me,—your pretty self into the bargain!” He laughed again.

She laughed too, lightly and carelessly, with a sudden change of manner; no one had ever known such a Meg as this. “It was for love of my castle and lands, then, that you took Lord Marlowe and kept him here for weeks,—in this very room, was it?” she turned her head from side to side, while Jasper stared at her in wonder. Had she ever loved the man, that she could speak of him so heartlessly? Who would put his trust in a woman? And Harry Marlowe could have freed himself at any moment by the promise to see her no more! And the wretched Antonio had risked his life, sacrificed it, for the sake of her beauty! A touch of scorn crept into Jasper’s thoughts of the beautiful girl who sat there. He was too simple to understand her madness of proud anger against the man whom she now thought she hated just as passionately as she had loved him. She had been fooled and scorned, she believed; the Roden blood was not of a kind to bear these things patiently. “This room—no,” Jasper said, after a moment’s silence. “This is the guest-chamber, the best room in my house. My Lord lived under the roof. I will show you, when you please.”

“I do not care to see,” she answered coldly.

"Very well. Decide your own fate, mistress, and instantly. We do not waste words here. If you will give me your hand in marriage, I will clear King's Hall of the rabble that make a warren of it now. They shall be sent packing, men and women, I promise you. I know what a gentleman's house should be, and I will not disgrace you. Neither will I marry you without your free consent. If I have not that, you shall stay here till dawn, if you will, and sleep as sound and safe as in your own tower at Ruddiford. Then the men who brought you here, muffled and a prisoner, shall attend you home in the morning with all respect, mounted on the quietest horse in my stables."

"Ruddiford,—return to Ruddiford," the girl murmured almost unconsciously.

"Ay," he said. "You have nothing to fear. The Italian viper is dead, who by a rascally trick thought he had won you."

"Antonio dead!" the girl started and shivered.

"Dead,—do you mourn for him?" Jasper said roughly.

To that she made him no answer. Her lovely eyes, full of some strange passion and despair, rested upon him an instant, then once more wandered vaguely round the room. She muttered something very low, of which he caught only the two last words, "the Queen." He stood waiting, with a patience that would have seemed marvellous to those who knew him. He was a manly and fine figure, in spite of his bandaged head; his eyes were honest and clear; his red hair curled close where it could be seen.

Margaret looked at him again. Her mouth and eyes were very sad, but she spoke with clear decision. "My grandfather refused me to you," she said; "but he did not know that I should be left alone, without friend or lover. Those to whose care he trusted me, see how they failed us,—worse than failed, oh my God!—and what a winter of horror and

pain ! You are a man, Jasper Tilney ; I believe you will not be false or cruel. Love !—it is a pretence, or a horror. If you care not for me, you care for my old Ruddiford, and you will be a good master to my people. And it is not giving the castle to the White Rose, for you will hold it for King Henry, for my grandfather's sake, in spite,—in spite of—” she broke off, for her voice failed and her eyes dimmed and fell.

He still waited, grim and soldier-like, on her words.

With the dignity of a young Queen, and with a grace all her own, she rose and made a step towards him, holding out her hand. “I will marry you,” she said. “Ruddiford shall be yours, Jasper.”

He stared, as if he had not heard aright ; then he went down on his knee, took her hand gently and kissed it, as well as his clumsy bandage would let him. Rising to his feet, he looked down upon her from his great height with a wondering kindness. “I thank you, Margaret. I will be true to you,—and to the Red Rose,” he said.

The Fellowship listened with lengthened faces, when they heard the consequence of their latest essay in kidnapping,—that King's Hall was to be a haunt for them no longer. But Jasper did not mince matters. To the argument that he and his lady wife would surely live at Ruddiford, and that he would have plenty of use, in these stirring times, for a bold company of devoted friends keeping house for him at King's Hall, he answered that his mind was made up ; he would live as a decent lord of the manor should, and would lead a wild Fellowship no longer. He promised them large sums of money, and help and friendship in the future, especially if they would keep the laws. But King's Hall must be cleared of them and all the disreputable following they had gathered together since he turned it from a peaceful country-house into a haunt of adventurers. He had promised Mistress Roden that the old house should be once more worthy

of his parents, who would have turned in their graves could they have seen the use their wild son had made of it.

They laughed, they growled, they called him ungrateful, when he came down into the hall that night and broke his tidings; but he was master among them, and they dared not grumble too desperately in his presence. To all minds was present the example, so much talked of in their fathers' and grandfathers' days, of wild Prince Hal and the change in his life when he became King of England. These two men of strenuous natures may have had something in common. And there were those among the Fellowship, after all,—young Lancelot and others—who were a little tired of their daily life of violence and rapine. They were influenced, though they would not confess it, by Jasper's advice. "If you want fighting, go and fight for the Red Rose. The King and Queen want every strong arm we have, and will want more, I reckon, as the months fly. England has a stormy time before her. If you are weary of it all, go home and hunt over your fathers' lands and drive their bondmen to the plough."

That was a strange night of noise and clamour at King's Hall. Only one person slept, and that was Margaret Roden. She laid herself down on the great bed, knowing herself as safe, under her wild bridegroom's roof, as in her own tower at Ruddiford, safer indeed than in these last weeks of treason and conflict. She slept profoundly, and was not awakened by the howling of the wind and the dogs, the tramping up and down of armed men, the excited chatter of the women, who, in obedience to their master's most unusual order, were sweeping and cleaning the hall and the great staircase; the roaring of fires, the shouting of the cooks who were beginning to prepare the wedding feast of which the Fellowship would not be balked, being bent on a glorious end to their jolly life at King's Hall.

Meg slept through all these sounds and others which concerned her even more nearly. She was waked before dawn by the old hag who had waited on her the night before, and was told that the priest was ready to hear her confession, that Jasper had already confessed and been shriven.

Meg made no difficulty. Old Dr. Curley himself, who had been carried back from Ruddiford by Leonard's thoughtful orders, was far more disturbed than she. His pink face was almost livid and his hands were trembling. Helpless as he knew himself to save her, he adjured her to speak the truth; was this marriage forced upon her against her will?

"No, father," she answered. "It is by my own free will and consent"; and she smiled upon him, so that, when his duty was done, the old man went away muttering to himself, while tears ran down his face. "To see so lovely a maid broken-hearted! For some tale lies beneath this. Our Jasper is not entirely a child of the devil,—none knows it better than I! but he is not the mate for Mistress Roden, and old Sir William knew it well. Ah, King's Hall and I would have had little to say one to another, had I known the work that lay before the Vicar of King's Hall. Lent, too! Marrying and feasting in Lent! But God knows I dare not refuse. Ay! He knows all!"

The first light of the spring dawn was beginning to shine in the east, when he stood before his altar, prepared to celebrate the second strange and sudden marriage King's Hall had lately seen.

The candles flared in the wind which rushed in at many a crack and crevice, and the scene was ghostly and wild enough. All the crowd of faces were there again, some hidden in the shadow of the great pillars, some, nearer the windows, lit up by the glimmer of dawn that struggled, faint and white, with a few yellow and flickering lights within.

Out in the wide space before the altar, with the

vaults under their feet where the old Tilneys lay, the two stood alone. Meg was very erect and perfectly still ; her satin folds gleamed in the crossing lights, and her jewels flashed softly, drawing many greedy eyes from the congregation. She was perfectly pale ; even her eyes had no life in them, as she kept them fixed on the brightening glory of the east window.

Jasper Tilney towered on her right hand. His head was still bandaged, but the barber of the house had cut his matted hair and washed his face. He was dressed in a fine suit of blue velvet and fur, and, but for Antonio's dagger, would have been as handsome a groom as any bride could have desired. The eyes that held and devoured Margaret were depths of blue fire ; if she had met them, she might have read there something more than love of her castle and lands ; but she looked steadily away from him.

As Dr. Curley opened his mouth to begin, a trumpet-blast rang and thrilled through the church. He stopped, breathless, and every man looked at his neighbour.

Chapter XXIII

MARGARET OF ANJOU

IT was explained to Queen Margaret that the young mistress of Ruddiford Castle did not meet her and King Henry in courtyard or hall, because she was waiting on the death-bed of Sir Thomas Pye, her grandfather's faithful old friend and executor, himself truly a martyr for the cause of Lancaster.

Henry Marlowe, representing the owner of the place, ignorant indeed of all that his love was suffering from his absence, found it impossible at first to leave the presence of their Highnesses. When the King, weary and frail, had gone to rest after his journey, the Queen retired from the hall to Sir William's room above, and summoned Harry, attending on her, to give an account of his own adventures and of the changes and chances that had happened to Ruddiford since he first arrived there a couple of months before. Queen Margaret herself had seen vicissitudes during that time. She had had her triumph at Wakefield, her march southward, full of hope and courage, her fresh victory at St. Albans, with the rescue of the King. Then,—through the fault of her wild northern followers more than her own—she had been turned back from the gates of London, and was now retreating to the friendly north again, with a spirit as high as ever, a beauty more wonderful, so brightly and resolutely did the flame of life burn behind delicate features wasted with hardship and sorrow. The softness of early youth and the gaiety which had won so many hearts were gone for ever, and it was a stern face in repose, but for a friend and trusty follower there was still the smile and the gracious

sympathy that enchanted men. Margaret always forgot her own many troubles and few joys in those of her friends.

She sat in Sir William's great chair, leaning her cheek on her thin hand, her dark eyes soft and intent, her mouth set quietly, as the evening light from the great window filled the room, and Harry, kneeling beside her in the scene of two of the chief events of his story, told her all, from his first sight of Margaret Roden and disobedience to his stepmother's mission, to the adventure of drawing lots that very day,—told her, with a flush on his face, of his stepmother's falseness, of the Yorkist banner flying on the keep, of the tragic death of Isabel. Whatever Margaret of Anjou might have felt, only the faintest smile showed rejoicing at the fate of her enemy. And those who chose to tell scandalous stories, either in malice or ignorance, as to herself and the favourite courtier who knelt now, pale and haggard, beside her chair, saying that not loyalty alone, but some closer and less honourable tie, linked him to her fortunes, might have been ashamed if they had heard the talk of the two that day.

"Then, my Lord," she said, watching him closely, "you fear that in regaining this castle for the King you have in strict justice renounced your right to marry Sir William's heiress?"

Harry hesitated a moment. "Madam," he said, "let justice be what it may, I cannot resign her to that low-born knave. I thought the lots were safe; I prayed to God that they might be; 'twas like the ordeal of fire or water or red-hot iron. It seemed to me that God would show His will in such a matter, but that cannot be," as Margaret smiled and moved her head. "Nay, I have but one thing to do. I told the youth I would fight him, would stain my sword with his rascal blood,—better that than——"

"He may have cheated you in the drawing of the lots."

"Impossible! I saw the whole matter. So also

did Tilney, my enemy and rival, but an honourable man."

"This matter must be in my hands," the Queen said. "I will take the maid into my care and wardship. Her grandfather is dead; your stepmother, to whom the foolish old man trusted her future, is dead; God rest their souls, loyal and disloyal, in His mercy! Come, I am Queen of England yet. I held your Margaret at the font; she must be mine, her castle and lands mine, to give to whom I will. Do not concern yourself about this Italian; I will send him abroad. I need a messenger to carry letters to Naples; he shall go. I will see you married, and you shall hold Ruddiford till I have gathered my fresh army and return from the North again. Cheer those gloomy looks, my Lord! Master Tilney's prison has entered into your soul. I tell you, these successes of Edward of March are but like a summer storm. The Midlands, the north, the backbone of England, we hold them still; in the south and east, too, we have many a stronghold. Your brother, Dick Marlowe, holds your house of Swanlea. He brought his wife to me,—though her brother be lawless and your rival, Tilney of King's Hall is a loyal old name—but I sent them back to keep their corner of Buckinghamshire. You hear me, my Lord? All will yet be well."

As the Queen spoke, her dark eyes softened and shone with the inspiring light that had sent many a man to death for her sake. Stooping forward, smiling, she touched the hair that fell over Harry's brow with the points of her long fingers. The touch was like a friendly benediction. "Rise up, Sir Knight," she said, almost playfully, "and lead us to your lady. We are curious to see the maiden who made such a conquest. We will visit the good old man whose bedside she cannot leave. He will pass the more happily, with his Queen's thanks and farewell."

"Madam, you are very gracious," Harry Marlowe said.

A tear fell upon the Queen's hand as he kissed it. Her eyes lingered on him for a moment with a kind smile, in which there was the faintest shade of wonder and pity. Possibly the nickname of Mad Marlowe was not unknown to her.

She wrapped herself in a dark cloak, and went with him alone through the twilight across the castle courts to Margaret Roden's tower. In the court below all was very still; there were no guards to be seen. The door at the foot of the winding staircase stood open, and voices could be heard above; some argument was going on; there was a confused terror in the sounds, yet the voices were low, as if in the presence of something awful.

The Queen and Harry paused upon the stairs. "What is this chattering?" she said.

He turned a white face towards her. "She is not there," he muttered.

Then, forgetting all ceremony, he leaped up the stairs to the half-open door of Margaret's apartments. Looking in, he saw a group of girls huddled together at the foot of a bed, while old Dame Kate, sobbing bitterly, was drawing the sheet over the face of one who had that moment died. Harry Marlowe strode forward, and laid his hand in place of hers as she started back in a terror that turned instantly to relief and joy. The Queen, wrapped up from recognition, followed him swiftly in and stood at his elbow.

"Ah, my Lord! And Mistress Meg! Thanks be to God!" the old woman cried trembling. "But you are too late; his Reverence the good Vicar is gone. Alas, alas! I sent these foolish maids to find a priest in the town, and they pretend they could not find him. Heaven bless and comfort him. He has died without the Sacraments, even as his worship Sir William did, but in peace, in peace, and praying to God with his last breath to bless and protect you, Meg, sweetheart! Lord, Lord! and you were away with the Queen! But she is safe with you, my

Lord ; and if I be not mistaken, Master Tilney will provide that the wicked Tony trouble you no more.” Harry Marlowe had taken the sheet in his hand. He held it for a moment, while Margaret of Anjou leaned over the bed and made the sign of the cross on the peaceful brow. “It is the face of a saint,” she murmured. “God rest him ! God comfort him ! Paradise is for such as he. A martyr may safely die unhouselled.”

With one hand she took the sheet from Harry, and lightly laid it over the face of the old man. With the other she threw back the hood that screened her face, and then turned with a sudden fierceness to Dame Kate, who stared and trembled. The words that were on Harry’s lips were spoken by the Queen. “Where is your mistress ? ”

“Madam, Madam,” the old woman stammered hopelessly. “Madam, she,—hath gone to meet their Highnesses the King and Queen. But who—who ? ”

“What does this mean ? ”

“When,—with whom did she go ? ”

The questions were asked simultaneously by the Queen and Lord Marlowe.

Dame Kate’s confused explanation was not reassuring. Harry Marlowe stood with clenched hands, stunned for the minute by this new misfortune. The Queen’s questions, quick and haughty, terrified both the Dame and the maidens, who now guessed who it was with whom they had to do. Dame Kate could only tell what she herself had seen and heard ; punishment descending on Antonio for some insult, she supposed, to her lady, the sudden sharp struggle between him and Jasper Tilney. “I doubt he claimed her,—your lordship knows,—he thought her his own—”

“Leave that, nurse, leave that ; he will answer it to me,” Harry cried passionately.

“Ah ! and your lordship scarce knows how much he hath to answer for. The prize was not honestly won.”

"We said it, my Lord!" exclaimed the Queen. "Leave the wretched Italian, old dame, but go on, we command you. Where is your mistress now? Answer, or to the dungeon with you!"

Dame Kate dropped on her knees and cried for mercy. Her words tumbled over each other as she hurried out the story, how Mistress Meg had seemed mad, had called her to dress her in her most gorgeous array, had ordered Jasper Tilney's men to escort her to the hall, that she might receive the Queen, had bidden the Vicar a loving farewell, telling him to live for her wedding,—“with you, my Lord.” Dame Kate stopped suddenly; she dared not repeat Leonard's words as to Lord Marlowe and the Queen.

"Go, on,—what more, what more?" Harry Marlowe cried impatiently.

Truly there was no more, except that Mistress Meg in her beautiful gown had swept through the door, the men following her—robbers as they were, one of them stole the coverlet of Mistress Meg's work from the Vicar's bed!—and so she went, and Dame Kate saw her no more, but the maidens who were in the room below could bear witness that the men told them their lady was going to meet the Queen.

"My Lord, there is some foul play here," the Queen said. "Mark you, woman, your mistress never reached the hall. Miserable wretch, why did you let her out of your sight? What, a young and lovely girl, alone with men whom you say were robbers and ruffians! Good God, dame, why did you not keep your mistress safe locked within the room there? Well might she desire our presence and protection,—but yet—but yet——"

She turned to Harry Marlowe. Forgetting her and his courtier duties, he cried out: "The castle must be searched. Jasper Tilney, I must find him"—and he rushed from the room.

"On my honour, this Tilney is a lad of spirit," the Queen murmured, and smiled, though angrily. "Our

good Marlowe finds himself scarce a match for such a rival. First to kidnap the bridegroom, then the bride!—'tis a lively game, savouring more of France than slow-blooded England." As she turned to go, the frightened girls met a glance which made them cower before her, "Follow your Queen," she commanded them.

The ignorant ringers went on clanging the joy-bells for the triumph of Lancaster, the presence of the King and Queen; the royal standard drooped in heavy folds beside that of Roden on the keep. Neither the ringers nor the strong men who had hoisted the banner knew that Sir Thomas the Vicar lay dead, and that Mistress Margaret had disappeared into the mists that were gathering thick and white over the marshy fields.

The consternation in town and castle was very great when these news became known. People told each other in the street, whispering fearfully, as if Ruddiford had reached its lowest depth of evil luck; and this, though the woman who had worked so many harms lay dead in the priest's house.

The brothers Timothy and Simon came back from their task of preparing her for burial. They had not left it when some one, looking in at the door, told them open-mouthed that the King and Queen were come. Personally, the two worthies had no special devotion to the King and Queen. They might have expressed their feelings in immortal words: "A plague o' both your houses!" Why must the cruel civil war ravage a peaceful country town, such as Ruddiford had been for centuries? Timothy and Simon cared neither for King nor Queen, mad lord nor treacherous lady. They were faithful to their old master and chieftain, and therefore to his side in the quarrel; but all their love and heart's loyalty was for Mistress Meg.

Weak and tired from their painful day's work and from hard imprisonment which went before it, the brothers hurried back towards the castle.

"Now, Simon, come you home," said the little lawyer. "You need rest and refreshment; the colour is clean gone from those cheeks of yours. Come; I have the will in my pouch. Queen or no Queen, nothing can happen to Mistress Meg without us, the executors."

Simon only answered by quickening his short steps, and passing the turn which led to their house. "Talk of cheeks, brother Timothy!" said he. "You were always lean, but now you are as lanthorn-jawed as the Vicar, God bless him! Mistress Meg and Dame Kate are no bad doctors, but Heaven knows what confusion there may be now, with all these strangers about. I go as fast as shanks will carry me, to tend the Vicar and see that all is well."

As they came near the gate there was a great clamour within. Suddenly Black Andrew, breaking through a quarrelling group of the Queen's troopers, rushed past and stopped an instant to cry to them.

"O' God's name, masters, where have you been? The devil is abroad with a vengeance, and has spirited Mistress Meg away. You may well stare. She is gone,—gone,—no one knows whither. My Lord is mad indeed. We ride——"

"And the Vicar!" shrieked Simon, catching at his sleeve; but the man-at-arms tore himself away. "They say he is dead, and lucky for him," he shouted as he ran.

The two worthies looked at each other for a moment, pale and stony, then raced together through the gateway with the speed of young men. "God forgive me if I am wrong, but I suspect Master Tonio hath a hand in this," Simon muttered breathlessly.

The hoofs of two horses clattered over the bridge, plunging out into the dark country veiled in mist, thundering over hedge and ditch and along the deep miry ways towards King's Hall. The riders were Lord Marlowe and Black Andrew. Though no sure knowledge was to be had of Meg's fate, all suspicion pointed

to her having been carried off by Jasper Tilney and his men. If this was the case, it was certain enough that only superior force would rescue her. But Harry's impatience would not wait for the preparing of a troop who should over-awe Jasper into giving up his prize. He must see for himself. Without a plan, and against the Queen's advice, he took Black Andrew and they rode.

It was deep dark night when they reached King's Hall, for though Andrew knew the road well, the mist confused him so that he lost his way more than once. All the gates of the old place were fast locked and barred, but the inhabitants were neither quiet nor asleep. Dogs barked and bayed in the yard, there was a confused sound of voices, and the windows that could be seen above the high outer wall were lit up brightly. The silent gables rose a darker shadow against the dark and misty sky. The river fog wreathed the place about in shifting twirls and heavy masses, one moment impenetrable, the next, broken into waves by an almost imperceptible breath of wind.

The horsemen dismounted and knocked upon the gates; there was no answer. The dogs barked more fiercely, but the human voices drew no nearer. The breeze that sighed lightly from the west brought an amazing savoury smell of all kinds of cookery; the Fellowship fared well, it seemed, and their supper was to be a very late one.

"If Mistress Meg be here, they will not starve her," Black Andrew muttered as he sniffed the odour of divers meats.

Was she there? Was she not there? Lord Marlowe, battering the gate with his sword-hilt, called aloud on Jasper Tilney; there was no reply.

At last, after riding round and round the place, as well church and churchyard as house and all its precincts, without the possibility of making their way in, they resolved that this quest of theirs was hopeless. At any rate, two men could do nothing; and Andrew,

now conscious of a better liking for my Lord, whose passion for Mistress Meg was so evidently real, gruffly counselled riding back to Ruddiford and returning with a strong force to break into King's Hall.

"Still, I doubt she be not here, my Lord," he said.

Harry Marlowe looked at him wildly for a moment. "Where is the Italian? He too has disappeared. If she be not in the hands of Tilney and his Fellowship, then,—where is she?"

Andrew wagged his head. By means of Dame Kate, the tale of the straws had soon been spread through the castle, and Andrew felt measureless scorn for those who, no matter what the reason, could have ventured such a treasure on such a chance. "Nay," he said, "Master Tony was in their hands, and roughly treated, as I hear. He may have escaped them; he was the very devil for cunning; I never trusted him. But he alone could scarce have rescued Mistress Margaret from the guard of a dozen men. Who knows? 'Tis all a mystery. I would we could find Tony. I tell your worship, for craft and wiles I never met his match."

Lord Marlowe groaned. He had dismounted, throwing his bridle to Andrew, and now for a few minutes he stood before the gate, staring aloft at the high gable where he had spent so many weeks as Jasper Tilney's prisoner. "The man is a gentleman," he muttered. "But the other,—a low knave of bad foreign blood—ah God, his tiger face when he pulled the long straw!—and I scorned him, thinking it mattered not. Ay, he may have escaped from Jasper's men, and he may by some devilish cunning have seized upon her. The castle must be searched again, the whole country must be searched; if she be not here at King's Hall, then, in the name of God, where is she? Away, Andrew, mount and away?"

So Mistress Meg's lover grieved and debated, while the Fellowship within their walls, making ready for their leader's wedding, laughed at the clamour he had made, while beyond one of their lighted windows the

girl he sought lay sleeping peacefully in her white gown, undisturbed and unknowing.

There were many lights about the castle when Lord Marlowe and Andrew rode up again to the bridge, for the Queen's troop kept good guard. It was known that a messenger had been sent by Lady Marlowe to the Yorkist leader, and rumour said that Yorkist spies had dogged the army on its way north. They might well have carried the news that the King and Queen had separated from the main body and were resting at Ruddiford. But all the country seemed quiet, so far south as King's Hall.

Still, something had disturbed the guards at the gateway, and when Lord Marlowe rode in under the tower, one of them had been let down by torch-light over the parapet and was examining the body of a drowned man, as it seemed, which the stream had brought down past the mill and lodged against a pier of the bridge.

As they dragged it up and lifted it into the light, those who belonged to the place cried out sharply that it was Antonio. But none of the men had ever loved the foreigner; they had envied his favour and resented his authority; there were no tears to be shed for the beautiful Italian boy, now disfigured and wounded, so that they saw it was not the river that had killed him, but the violent hands of men.

"So! Master Tony hath met his fate," Black Andrew growled. "If this be not the work of the Fellowship, may I never draw knife again. My Lord, see you, this answers one question. Mistress Meg is at King's Hall."

Harry stared down on the boy's dead face. The body lay at his feet on the pavement of the bridge, and as the men stood in a circle, their eyes glanced curiously from the dead to the living. Mad Marlowe's lips moved without a sound; then he said aloud, "Give him Christian burial," spurred his horse and dashed on over the bridge into the castle.

Weary as she was with her journey, Queen Margaret had not allowed herself to rest. The King, weak in mind and body, and the little Prince of seven years old, slept through that night of anxiety under the shadow of Ruddiford's old towers, as if England was at peace and they were paying a friendly visit to the old hero of Agincourt, who would have received them with such honour and such joy. But Margaret of Anjou, on whom the Lancastrian cause depended, had then and always her own claim on the adoring love of her friends and followers ; their troubles were hers.

Even before Harry Marlowe came back to her with the news of his failure, she had decided what must be done. His own men and fifty of her boldest fellows had had orders to arm, and long before dawn the little force was ready. It passed out with flaring torches across the bridge into the cold dimness of the fog-laden country. At its head, to the surprise and admiration of all those left behind, who would gladly have crowded after it to Mistress Meg's rescue, but were commanded to stay in guard of the castle and its royal guests, rode the Queen herself beside the Queen's man.

"Slack not your riding for me, my Lord," she said, and smiled. "'Tis nothing new for us to ride on a foray together. I am a good commander, you know it. Truly I cannot rest within walls till I have young Margaret safe under my wing."

A hundred yards or so behind the troop, keeping out of sight in the fog, or among the trees as day began to break, rode the two excellent worthies, Timothy and Simon. They were no soldiers : nobody had thought of bidding them arm and ride ; but in this matter they took the law into their own hands. Simon was very positive that it was their duty to find Mistress Meg and take charge of her, wherever she might be. Timothy could not let Simon go alone ; he also carried in his pouch the unwieldy parchment, their credentials, in which by Sir William's own desire their names

were written. The Vicar being dead and gone, the whole responsibility appeared to rest on them, and they took it up cheerfully. Their stout nags were reined in with difficulty; they had no wish to join the troop, which would not have welcomed them; neither did they wish to come to actual blows with the King's Hall Fellowship. Their prudence was probably their salvation.

In the breaking of the day, just when the wedding service was about to begin in the church at King's Hall, the Ruddiford troop reached that point in the road where a track turned across a field to the old house on the hill. The light was still misty and dim. Suddenly a wild trumpet blast broke the silence of the fields, till then profound, except for the ringing of bridles and splash of hoofs on mud or grassy margin. Another troop, coming from the south, advanced suddenly, breaking through the mist, prancing, first like shadows, then solid men and horses; then followed a line of archers, forming up across the road. Both bodies of men came to a halt; there were cries and shouts and trumpet-calls.

"Who goes there?"

"A York! A York!"

"A Lancaster! A Marlowe! God save King Harry!"

A flight of arrows parted; three Ruddiford men fell; then the two little armies dashed headlong at each other, and a wild skirmish began.

Chapter XXIV

THE FIGHT AT KING'S HALL

WHILE the men dashed forward, flinging themselves into the fray, Harry Marlowe caught the Queen's bridle and kept her impatient horse in the rear.

"Nay, nay, I love a fight,—they cannot kill me," she said, and laughed triumphantly. "Loose the bridle, my friend. I tell you, I bear a charmed life."

"Madam, if you love us all!" Harry cried. "See, yonder is a church, the church of King's Hall. Take sanctuary, I beseech you! This troop out-numbers us; I see more, more in the mist. Madam, if you are here, my arm is tied; I cannot fight, except to defend your Highness. If I know you safe, this rabble shall soon be driven south again."

"There, there, I obey you," Margaret said impatiently.

With a quick turn to the right, she galloped alone up the glimmering field. All around, the dark cushioned woods lay motionless; the mist was slowly clearing before the breaking day. She saw lights in the church, put her horse at the gate and cleared it, then springing over the few low graves that broke the turf, stooped from her saddle at the church-door and beat upon it with the handle of her whip. It was instantly opened, and a score of men crowded out to meet her, staring at her with fierce curiosity. One put out a rough hand to help her to dismount, but she waved him back haughtily. The unexpected reception startled her. As the low arched door stood

open, she saw more armed men crowding the dim half-lit aisle. There was a murmuring and exclaiming of women's voices too, and dogs ran out barking between her horse's feet.

While the Queen hesitated for a moment before entering this strange sanctuary, the wild noises of the fight half a mile away seemed to draw nearer, and the men close to her began to shout out questions: "What is't?" "Whence comes the lady?" "Who then are fighting yonder?"

"Nay, answer me," she cried to them. "Are you for York or Lancaster?" Her voice, clear and high, rang through the open door into the church.

"Lancaster! The Red Rose! For Lancaster, we!" a chorus from hoarse throats replied to her.

Leonard pushed his way close to her, seizing her bridle, staring at her with hard, bold eyes that fell when she looked upon him.

"Do you not hear them?" she said. "Away to help them, friends! The army of York is there,—March himself, for what we know, and we have but a small band to meet them. We know you, gentlemen, the gallant Fellowship of King's Hall, your help means victory. Where is your leader?" As the Queen spoke, she stretched out her hand to Leonard and allowed him to lift her from the saddle. The men gazed upon her as she stood among them, fearless and majestic. Long coils of hair had been loosened from under her riding-hat, and fell upon her shoulders; under a velvet coat she wore a thin shirt of mail; a sword and dagger, both light and fine, were fastened to her jewelled girdle. Her beautiful dark eyes blazed with excitement; the flush on her face made her young again, and she smiled as she met their wondering glances. "Nay, we know his name," she said. "Where is Master Tilney?"

"He will be with you anon, Madam," answered Leonard, the readiest spokesman, and he shouldered one or two of his comrades back, with warning looks

and growls. "Hold thy fool's tongue! See you not? 'Tis the Queen, she will stop the wedding. Ay, Madam, we be at your service."

"The Queen, the Queen!" was quickly whispered round among the strange congregation, and in staring upon her they mostly forgot the noise of battle which came rolling nearer and nearer as the air of morning moved.

Margaret became grave again; her quick ears caught Leonard's words, and she was reminded of what she had half forgotten, the object with which she and Lord Marlowe had ridden out to King's Hall. She went forward into the church, the crowd making way for her; there was something that awed them in her walk and bearing. Reaching the nave, she turned to the east and saw, in the light of the candles about the high altar which struggled with the gleaming windows and the rising day, bridegroom and bride standing there, the old priest in his vestments beyond them. It looked, at first sight, as if the marriage service had not been interrupted by the Queen's sudden arrival; but in truth those three at the altar had not budged since she knocked upon the door. Margaret Roden stood statue-like, beautiful but stunned; her eyes had not moved from the east window's deepening glory. Jasper Tilney, upright and silent, had turned his fierce wounded head and splendid height away from bride and priest and altar, and was looking westward with an angry question in his eyes. What were those distant sounds of warfare? What was it that distracted the Fellowship and made them crowd to the church-door? As for poor Dr. Curley, his white hair bristled on his head and his pink face grew even pinker, as he stood waiting, afraid to call back Jasper's attention, conscious that something very strange was coming to pass.

And now that beautiful Amazon, Queen Margaret, of whose pride and daring and resolution and wit there were so many stories afloat in England, came

walking alone up the pavement of the broad aisle, and mounted the steps into the choir. Beyond the church windows, in the world shut out by their blazonry that began to glitter in the dawn, the noise of fighting rolled to and fro, now nearer, now further off again like the clamorous waves of a distant sea.

The Queen changed colour slightly, as she looked from one to the other and saw by what a narrow margin, if at all, her god-daughter would be saved from a marriage with the wild leader of a troop such as that which was now streaming out with oaths and cries into the churchyard. The girl's beauty startled her, and no less the man's savage though handsome looks. A strange contrast he to the gentle courtier, yet very true soldier, Harry Marlowe! The Queen addressed him in tones that Jasper would have borne from no other person in England at that day. "What do you here, Master Tilney? Who gave you licence to marry with this lady, Mistress Margaret Roden, whom we named at the font, and who is now our charge, being under age, and her grandfather dead? You have stolen her away from Ruddiford, and by main force you are marrying her. But we will not have it so."

Jasper flushed up darkly as he bowed to her. "Madam, by your words you are the Queen. But pardon me, I dispute your right to interfere. Mistress Roden is my bride by her own consent; the priest here will bear me witness. I will give her up to no man or woman, not even to you."

The Queen frowned impatiently. "Nay," she said, "you outlaws of King's Hall, you think you are masters in England. First you kidnap our faithful servant Lord Marlowe for your own ends, detaining him from our service. Then you carry away the heiress of Ruddiford, and pretend it is by her own consent. The maid's consent has nothing to do with the matter; but if it had, who can believe you?"

The Queen walked up to Meg and laid her hand

on her shoulder. The girl trembled sharply under her touch, looked at her with wild eyes and was not reassured, for the elder woman's face, beautiful and striking, spoke of nothing but haughty anger.

"Is the girl crazy?" said the Queen. "To your knees, Margaret, your hands in mine; it is not true that you have consented to a marriage with this man?"

Meg knelt as she was commanded. Her lips moved; the Queen stooped over her, frowning and impatient, for at first there was nothing to be heard. "Yes, Madam," the girl murmured, as if half dead, with white lips and suddenly drooping eyelids.

"And what of Lord Marlowe?" whispered the Queen, so low that only Meg could hear. "Then," she said aloud, "his threats have terrified you into it. Master Tilney, you and I will settle this matter. Now, look and listen; your friends and followers are gone to fight for the Red Rose, while you linger here for the sake of a girl. No time for marrying, this; go, if you would not be shamed before all England. The White Rose is on the march, the army makes for Ruddiford, your King and Prince are there. Will you leave to Lord Marlowe the whole honour of driving back the enemy? Hark! the battle rolls this way. If you are a man, go!"

Jasper Tilney's blue eyes met hers, and the war between those wills, for a moment or two, was as fierce as that between the Red and White Roses. With a stride across the pavement, almost pushing the Queen aside, he lifted Meg to her feet and held her with both hands, gazing hungrily into the face that took no life from his near presence. He would have kissed her, but something, he knew not what, held him back. "God bless thee, Meg!" he said. "Be true to me, as I to you. I will come again when the fight is over."

He hardly waited to hear the sighed "Yes" that answered him, but loosened his sword and walked

away, tall, proud, reckless, clanking down the aisle, under the low arches, and out into the dim churchyard, already empty of his men, who had rushed to the fight without waiting for him to lead them.

It seemed that every man was wanted on the side of the Red Rose. Those sounds of battle rolling nearer to King's Hall meant that the Yorkist troop, strong in archers and cross-bow men, was pressing the Lancastrians hard ; that they were slowly retreating, fighting their way, across the field towards the strong position of the old house, where both shelter and reinforcement might be found. Many had fallen on both sides ; the few country people who ran in terror to stare saw dead and wounded men and struggling horses flung upon the grass, in the ditches, thatched hovels flaming, set on fire by one side or the other. The rising sun, as it drove away the mists, lit up the Midland landscape, usually so still. Men, ploughing or digging in the fields, left their work and ran to see, had arms thrust into their hands, fought in the ranks, and perhaps died. Till now, the war had been little to that country-side but a rumour ; the two Roses had not yet come to mean the fearful whiteness of death, the red of English blood shed by the hands of kindred, staining the new spring grass and making the ways slippery.

Harry Marlowe, and Black Andrew his lieutenant, fought hard in the van. It was of set purpose that they manœuvred back towards King's Hall, sending more than one messenger to call the Fellowship to their aid. They desired to draw the Yorkists into a trap, to check their advance on Ruddiford, where lay the supreme danger of their recapturing the King, and by a sudden attack from the west to divide them and throw them out of array.

The Fellowship dashed in, and the Yorkists, though more in number, fell back at their first fierce onslaught. They were on foot, half armed, unprepared, but each man was young, strong, and a soldier trained to fight

for his own hand. They grappled in single combat with as many of the enemy, clove men over the head with their swords, dragged them off their horses and stabbed them as they lay. Still the Yorkists pressed on, the fight growing hotter and hotter as it rolled up the broad field towards the buildings that crowned the hill and overhung the river.

It was here and now that Jasper Tilney's fate overtook him, and he died a death which redeemed his wild life and handed down his name for a few years as that of a hero in the country-side. That he foresaw it, young Lancelot bore witness afterwards. He met Jasper by the churchyard wall, carrying his sword, hurrying without horse or armour into the fight, as his companions had gone. The young fellow had been sent by Leonard to hurry Jasper forward; it was certain that the Fellowship would fight better with him to lead them.

"Ay, Lance, I come," Jasper said. "A last stroke for Tilney and his band, brave fellows all! A quiet life for such as I? 'Twas a dream, could never be. But thou, Lance, if thou come safe out of this, go back to thy father's house again."

It was a small skirmish enough, this battle of King's Hall, and left no trace of itself in history, hardly even in tradition. To be sure, that great field on the west side of the high road bears still, four hundred and fifty years after, the name of Deadman's Moor, and on it stands a hollow oak, survivor of a few trees, they again remnants of an earlier forest, which the country people call Battle Oak to this day, without knowing why or wherefore. But though the records of the war hardly chronicled that skirmish, it cost many good men's lives, and that of Lord Marlowe himself was only saved by the ready heroism of his rival.

A ring of Yorkist archers and cross-bow men had surrounded the oak, which then, young and majestic, spread its wide arms over the field. Harry Marlowe and a few others were caught, as in a trap; arrows

and bolts were poured in upon them ; two had already fallen. As Harry put his horse at the enemy to ride them down and break through, a man aimed at him deliberately from a few yards' distance. But at that same moment Jasper Tilney, sword in hand, sprang like a wild beast through the circle of steel, threw himself between Lord Marlowe and the bowman, and while rushing upon him with his sword received the arrow meant for Harry in his heart. Lance and a few others followed him, breaking at all points through the ring, driving back the archers by main force of sword and fury.

All this happened in a moment ; then the fight rolled away from the oak tree, forcing itself nearer and nearer to the gates of King's Hall. But it was there, under the great oak, when all was over and they came to bury the dead, that they found Jasper lying. The first arrow had freed his wild spirit ; but many others had pierced him. History knows nothing of his name, and under the fear of Edward the Fourth he had not even a monument ; but the Wars of the Roses claimed no bolder victim.

When Jasper had disappeared from the church, and it was empty,—for the rabble of servants and followers had run back to the house, to watch their own belongings and the end of the fight—Queen Margaret commanded the Vicar to show her the way up the tower. While the old man hastily put off his vestments and prepared to attend her, she looked in silence at Margaret Roden, whom the tribulations of the last few days, physical and mental, had robbed of all her young spirit and stateliness. She now stood like a drooping lily before the Queen ; pale, heavy-eyed, a little dishevelled, all the more deplorable of aspect because of her fine white gown, crushed and stained, and the jewels which hung upon her like fetters of bondage.

Her brain was almost too weary to think. It seemed that Fate had taken her and tossed her to

and fro, deceiving her in every one she trusted. Harry had been false to her; he had forsaken her for the Queen, for this woman who stood now before her and looked at her so strangely. Or rather, this was his love of old; the stories were true; he had cared for Meg but as a plaything, a toy for his hours of absence from this other Margaret. It must be true; or how could he have deserted her so utterly, accepted the consequence of his scandalous bargain, made no attempt to see her after the coming of the King and Queen, no attempt to rescue her from the hands of Jasper Tilney? All this poor Meg had said to herself over and over again, till her brain was dazed and she could think no more; and yet, now that she stood at the altar, prepared to marry Jasper Tilney, her burning anger of last night against Harry and the Queen had died down into the cold ashes of despair.

She saw no kindness in the eyes of the Queen; but indeed she feared and hated her too much to look for it. The eyes thrilled her; they seemed to read her heart, and she dared not meet them; her old courage had fled. They spoke of wonder and scorn. What did that whisper mean,—“And what of Lord Marlowe?” To Meg it seemed like a cruel insult.

Suddenly the Queen came close to her, laid her hand on her shoulder again, and spoke impatiently in a low voice: “Margaret, child, what of this foolery? You do not pretend to love that man?”

Meg shivered from head to foot. The Queen's touch, the suggestion, almost stopped the quick and faint beating of her heart. She pressed her hand over it, as with a great effort she answered: “Nay, Madam, not that, but——”

“Terror,—I knew it,” the Queen said, and her face changed suddenly; she smiled like an angel, if an angel be capable of a touch of scorn. “Be of good cheer, pretty one,” she said. “That will of yours is not strong enough,—but you are in our

hands now, and safe. Courage, child ! You have suffered ; so have we all. Think of your father, good and brave,—your grandsire, the old and honoured hero—God rest them ! Come, their descendant must not ruin her life through craven fear. A woman who submits to a forced marriage does not know her own strength, Margaret.”

The taunt, as it seemed, brought a flush to Meg's white face. She drew herself upright, almost shaking off the Queen's hand. *Craven !* the word was hard indeed to a girl who knew that she feared nothing, except treason and wickedness.

Margaret saw that she had touched her to the quick, and her smile had less scorn, and more tenderness. “Child,” she said, low and quickly,—the priest was coming back from the sacristy—“Child, the man who loves you, whom you love, is the bravest of the brave.”

The words seemed to Meg incomprehensible. To answer the Queen or ask her meaning was impossible ; the more she thought, the more puzzled was the poor tired brain.

Now she was alone ; the Vicar and the Queen were gone. She looked round at the dim shadows of the arches, down the long damp aisles ; in the distance, the tower door shrieked on its rusty hinges ; then within the church all was still.

But the wild confused noise of the fight, the twanging of bows, trampling of horses, shouts of men, trumpet-calls and heavy clash of steel, drew nearer and nearer outside the thick walls. She looked round her with a dizzy longing for escape ; but where could she go ? She stood still, trembling, half regretting the strong presence of Jasper, half conscious of a great joy that for the moment she was free from him. Even the Meg of last night, who had spoken to him so fearlessly, was not now to be recognised in this helpless, half-conscious girl.

Before she had been able to think, or to resolve

on anything, old Dr. Curley was beside her again, his face very red, his breath short and panting from the hasty climb up and down the tower. He looked at her seriously ; he was a kind old man, though timid and time-serving. He crossed himself and muttered : " Heaven forgive us ! Are we saved from crime and sin, or will Jasper yet claim her ? "

She turned to him, with an eager hand on his arm. " Father, hide me from the Queen ! "

He looked at her keenly. Could it then be true ? Was he mistaken in fearing, in spite of all, that this marriage had been forced upon her ? " What, my pretty lady ? " he said. " Hide you till Master Tilney comes back from the fight ? Well, perchance he would thank me, and yet—— "

" Do you hear, father ! " she said, not noticing his words. " Hide me from her,—from her,—from the Queen ! "

" 'Tis true," he told himself ; " her Grace would have stopped the wedding an she could, fight or no fight. Do not fear the Queen, mistress," he said aloud. " She has forgotten you ; she thinks of nothing but the fight ; there, on the tower, she will stay and watch till it is over. She waves her kerchief as a signal to her brave men ; they look up, they see her, and shout more loudly for the Red Rose. Why, even my deaf ears can hear them now, ' a Lancaster ! ' Till the White Rose men are flying southward, her Grace will not have a thought for you."

" Hide me, then, and quickly," the girl said, and pulled at his arm ; " in any cupboard, or dungeon, or vault, if you will ; only let them not find me and carry me back with them to Ruddiford."

He stared at her hesitatingly. " Nay, if you mean it, mistress, if you have courage, come this way."

Though the church swayed round her as she moved, Meg followed him closely. He stumbled up some steps into a side chapel off the choir, empty, except for a bare stone altar and two or three large tombs

against the wall. The priest took an iron bar from a corner, and lifted a broad, new-looking flagstone in the floor. Beneath this, a narrow flight of steps led down into a vaulted room, not very large, and not quite dark, for light and air found their way in through a small barred window under the chapel floor, almost hidden from the churchyard without, by one of the great buttresses that supported the church wall. It was in fact a small crypt, such as was not often used for burials, but sometimes for storing bones dug out of the churchyard. It was empty, however, and the surface of the red sandstone walls and floor was clean. The roof was so low that Meg could only just stand upright, when her trembling limbs had carried her down the steps. But she looked round her prison joyfully.

"Yes," she said, "here shall I rest till the fight is over. You will keep my counsel, father, from every one,—except Jasper," she added under her breath. "If he will claim me again, when the rest are gone and far away,—so be it! He is my only refuge. But that other—ah, I desire never to see him again."

The old man hardly heard her last words, for he was growing deaf, as he said. But he scrambled back into the chapel, as she let herself fall, exhausted, on the stone slab under the window, and soon came back with a great fur cloak and a pillow. To his surprise he found that Mistress Roden was already asleep. With trembling hands he pushed the pillow under her head and laid the cloak round and over her, then left her, dragging the stone into its place and hurrying back into the choir.

The noise of the battle was near enough now to terrify him, with all his faith in Jasper and the gallant Fellowship. It seemed as if the Yorkists were driving the Lancastrians by the field almost as far as the churchyard wall and the gates of the house.

Queen Margaret of Anjou watched from the church tower; the windows in the high gables of the house

were full of servants and frightened women ; the uproar was tremendous and the slaughter was becoming great. Still Harry Marlowe, the Ruddiford men, and those who remained of the Fellowship, fought hard with charge after charge upon the wild troop of the White Rose. The word *Margaret* was ever on his lips as he rode at the enemy, for loyalty and love bore the same name.

All this time, in the little dark underground chamber, Margaret Roden slept the sleep of a young hunted creature too exhausted for thought, or for any desire save that of escaping and lying down. Her low window let in the fiercer sounds of the fight, the shouts of a moment's victory, the cries and groans of the wounded. Later, a fearful noise of crackling wood, a smell of fire and smoke, a red light shining fiercely on the wall, the shrieks of women and trampling of hurried feet, told of fresh horrors ; but Margaret slept through all.

Now Harry Marlowe was searching for her desperately, high and low, from cellar to garret of the blazing house, to which the Yorkists had set fire before a last desperate charge, aided by countrymen who had gathered from all the farms and villages round, had finally driven them back, with the loss of half their number, helter-skelter along the south road. The battle of King's Hall was over,—a hard-won victory for the Red Rose.

Dr. Curley held his tongue. He was indeed too much distracted with saving his church, his flock, and his goods, too profoundly grieved at the death of his patron, to attend much to other people's matters ; and so at last, for the hour and most unwillingly, Lord Marlowe gave up his search and rode away with the Queen, back to Ruddiford.

The lost maiden, deep sheltered by the thick church walls, slept dreamlessly on.

Chapter XXV

MISTRESS MARGARET'S RESOLUTION

BY the end of that long spring day King's Hall was a heap of smoking ashes ; its inhabitants were scattered to the four winds ; and the distracted old Vicar had time to consider the fate of the girl whom, for his patron's sake even more than for her own, he had consented to hide. He confessed her hiding-place to three faithful men whom no court duties prevented from searching King's Hall and its precincts till they found her.

One after another, these four scrambled down into the crypt and crouched on the floor by the sleeping girl.

The scene was weird enough. A yellow gleam of sunset darted through the bars, but this was not enough to light the dark cavernous place, and Dr. Curley brought a lantern. Priest, lawyer, doctor, and soldier, all their eyes were fixed on Meg Røden, who lay, seemingly lifeless, covered with the heavy fur, just as Dr. Curley had left her some twelve hours before.

" 'Fore God, brother Simon, she is dead ! " muttered Timothy Toste, and Black Andrew, crawling on hands and knees to her feet, swore violently under his breath.

" Peace, peace, you are on holy ground," said Dr. Curley.

By this time the little apothecary was kneeling at the girl's head, bending over her, all ears and eyes

to catch her faint breathing, gently turning back the fur that covered her, finally, with tender hands, lifting her head from the pillow. "Nay, nay," he murmured. "The sweet lady lives ; 'tis but the long sleep of exhaustion,—and no wonder. She will speak anon. Two drops of my cordial—" he drew out a flask from an inner pocket. "There, my child, there, dear Lady Meg ! Nay, do not be angry, do not push me away. Open your pretty mouth, sweet babe ! Good Heaven, what has the child gone through,—and dressed for the wedding she escaped so narrowly !"

"Nay, Master Simon," the old priest interrupted, "had Jasper Tilney lived, he would have made her an honest husband. There be worse men, thousands of 'em. He was not a Court popinjay, like my Lord, but she did not dislike him."

"'Tis a strange tale," Simon said. "But, wise or foolish, she loved my Lord well ; every man at Ruddiford knew that. For my part, I never thought him worthy of her, a crazy dreamer ; yet, I suppose, 'twas Sir William's intent, and when we have her safe home again——"

His voice failed and he broke off suddenly. Meg sat upright and stared wildly round at their open eyes and gaping faces. Then, with a long sigh, it seemed that she came to herself, the self which Simon, at least, recognised very well. It was the Mistress Meg of old days, as proud and wilful as she was gentle and generous, who lifted a hand and pointed with a meaning finger at each of the men in turn. First it was the Vicar of King's Hall. "You have betrayed me, father, though it be to my friends. I gave my word to Master Tilney,—where is he ?"

The old man was suddenly choked with tears as he answered her : "Madam, your word is given back to you,—he died in the fight. God have mercy upon his soul !"

Meg bowed her head and crossed herself. Then she looked at Black Andrew, who crawled a yard

nearer, took the hem of her gown and kissed it, then lifted his rough face and waited her orders with a fierce steadfastness. She looked him full in the eyes, pointing with her finger. "You, Andrew, you were there, I know; tell me that the Red Rose won the day."

"Ay, mistress," he said, "but with a great loss, and the burning of King's Hall,—you may smell the smoke. God preserved you, or you might have been smothered in this kennel underground. Ay, 'twas my Lord Marlowe's bold fighting that won the day. The Queen cheered us, crying to us from the tower. By the bones of St. Andrew, 'twas the merriest fight I've seen for a long day! They be fled south again, all that were left of them. They thought we were lazy drones in the Midlands; but they found us wasps who could sting. Ruddiford and King Harry are safe, madam."

While he spoke, she listened intently. Her lovely eyes still tired and heavy-lidded, were cold and stern; her mouth looked hard and older by ten years. Simon, trying to watch her closely, could scarce see for tears; the suffering that the girl had gone through was so plainly written on the young soft features. Black Andrew, less easy to be moved, outwardly at least, than the two good brothers, and with eyes keen and strong, saw more than they did. He was aware that when Meg spoke again, though the voice was unconcerned, a very faint pink flushed the cheeks that were as pale as the creamy satin of her gown. She still pointed at him, but her eyes drooped a little from their fearless gaze. "Where is the Queen now?" she said. "And my Lord Marlowe,—where is he?"

"They are at Ruddiford," Andrew replied. "My Lord searched for you, Madam, till her Grace commanded him to return."

"Was he hurt in the fight?" Meg asked abruptly.

"No."

She had done with him, it seemed. The finger

pointed now at Timothy. "You made my grandfather's will," she said. "He ordered no marriage for me. Two of those in whom he trusted have failed him, and me. There remain you and Master Simon,—and Sir Thomas—" her voice trembled with a question.

"Alas, Mistress Meg," Timothy sighed, "you have him no more, your faithfullest old friend and servant. As the ruffian company carried you away to King's Hall, he passed to Paradise."

"Then he is in peace," Meg said, "and with more power to help me than on earth, may be." She paused a moment, praying silently; then went on in a low voice. "He knows now,—I would not ask, now, to fulfil a certain last request of mine. I have learnt,—I will not be played with any more. You two, you two," she pointed at Simon now, turning and looking into his friendly old face, all puckered as it was into lines of distress for her, "you are all I have left of the old time, the old life, before strangers came to trouble us at Ruddiford. Listen, dear Master Simon, I have been asleep and dreaming. I dreamed of my mother's country, of the great palace where she lived all among flowers and fruit, where the sky was blue and the sun shone. I know that her brothers and sisters dwell there still, in the city of Venice, on a clear canal that runs in from the sea, bright shining water all about their doors; no horses, but boats with gay rowers, carry them whither they would go. Why do you look upon me so? I am weary of England, weary of war and sadness. I gave my word to Jasper Tilney, but he is dead. My grandfather was foully murdered. Sir Thomas is dead, who next to him was my guardian friend. Another, who loved me in his wild way, is dead."

She stopped, and looked round upon them all. Simon and Timothy were silent before her; they could not tell whither she was leading them, and the responsibility seemed more than they could bear.

They were almost grateful to Black Andrew when he growled out : " Whatever may have chanced, Madam, there is one who loves you, and 'tis but yesterday that you loved him. I have no right to counsel you, but I say, come you home to Ruddiford, and be married to him. Your father was English,—what are foreign lands and foreign folk to you ? "

Meg frowned upon him, and the flush deepened. " You say well, Andrew ; you have no right to counsel me. I ask leave of none of you, remember ; I will go my own way. No returning to Ruddiford for me, till all these things are past away and forgotten. Do you understand me, all of you ! The Queen and her servants may do what they will ; my grandfather, we know, would have given them all,—except myself." She suddenly bent her head, put her hands together, and said solemnly : " I call our Blessed Lady to witness, and you four good men, that by my own will I will never again see Lord Marlowe." Then lifting her eyes, dark and sad, to Andrew : " You talk of love," she said, " but I know better than you. What is love ? " she laughed softly and bitterly. " Enough of that ; you know my mind ; it is firm, and will not alter. Now, you two,"—she turned to Simon and Timothy—" in my grandfather's name I ask you, will you travel with me to Italy ? "

" Mistress Meg asks what she might command," answered Simon, radiant and ready. He looked at his brother, whose face grew longer and longer. " I speak for me and thee, Timothy," he said. " Ruddiford and England are desolate enough nowadays. Often we have wished to see foreign parts before we died ; now comes the occasion, and the spirit shall not be wanting. Think of the learning of Italy, brother, the schools of law, of medicine, the supreme art that teaches the meaning of beauty. Ah ! I mind me how Master John Roden used to talk of it all. It would have pleased him well that his daughter should visit those lands, for he loved them. Why that

black face, Timothy ? What have you to say against it ? Nothing reasonable, I'll lay a bag of gold."

"Gold, gold ! that's the question," mumbled Timothy. "Can Mistress Roden travel for nothing ? And how can we leave our house and properties, our beasts, our clients and patients ? What will Ruddiford do without you and me, and how shall we live on the other side of the sea, and how shall we get back again ? For me, I care not to lay my bones in a foreign land,—to be robbed and stabbed by night, perhaps, and dropped into one of those canals Mistress Meg talks of. Ay, I too remember Master John's tales of Italy. Perils, perils by land and sea ! Nay, nay, Simon, thou art a babe ; Sir William did not make us executors that we might ruin ourselves, obeying a young maiden's every whim. Dear Mistress Meg, be not angry with old Timothy. It is not I who would press you to marry my Lord, your mind having changed in the matter ; but come you back to your old Ruddiford, and your faithful servants will keep you safe there."

Such a long sermon was seldom heard from Timothy. Meg listened to him impatiently, turning so pale the while that Black Andrew nudged the priest and muttered something about "wine and meat." The old man hurried away through the church. Andrew sat still, uncomfortably crouched, and listened rather grimly to the argument that went on,—Simon and his lady on one side, Timothy on the other. For himself, he would not open his mouth again ; he was too proud to expose himself to another such rebuff from Mistress Roden. He listened and marvelled. For as the dispute continued, it was plain that Simon, daring, resourceful, adventurous, would have the best of it in the end. Timothy had only to press a difficulty, for Simon to find the way out of it. As to money, they had their own treasure-chest ; they had a rich merchant cousin in London, who would supply them as they went through to take ship in the

Thames, and beyond this, see Mistress Meg's own jewels she was wearing, worth enough to take a dozen people to Italy and back again. As to conveying her safely and secretly, they would give it out at Ruddiford that their house would be shut up for a time, as they were going to visit their cousin in London town; and to carry their old housekeeper with them in a horse-litter, as many well-to-do citizens' wives travelled then. But they would send the good woman quietly away to her home at a distant farm, and they would take Dame Kate from the castle to attend on Mistress Meg, who must endure her hiding-place at King's Hall till all these arrangements were carried through.

Simon charged himself with the smuggling of Dame Kate out of the castle; for that matter, she could escape for herself easily enough. She had not been afraid to blow her own trumpet as to all she had done in helping the Red Rose party to surprise and retake the castle. Simon had heard it from herself, and now repeated it to Mistress Meg, who listened absently enough. All that was past history. Now, she was turning her face towards Italy and freedom. She would bear anything, wear any disguise, lie hidden for any number of days, go through any hardships of travel, any risks of land or sea, to gain her perfect freedom from the Queen's man, from the lover who had played with her, whose heart and true devotion were given to the Queen. Again and again she heard Lady Marlowe's voice saying words which never had been or could be forgotten even though in Harry's presence they could not be believed. "He went to join the one he loves best—yes, best in the world—another Margaret!" And again to Harry in that last tragic hour,—“She loves you, not merely as a partisan, and you loved her, till that fair face distracted you.” Then the sneers of Jasper Tilney's men, proving to a doubtful heart too certainly that the Queen once there, Harry had forgotten her.

So Black Andrew listened, and heard all, and said nothing. Now and then, as the talk went on, Meg's eyes rested on the grave dark face opposite, and now and then, child as she was still, she could not repress a faint smile, which did not stir its gravity. All the plan was discussed ; it took shape rapidly. Black Andrew neither spoke nor moved, till presently the chatter of Simon, the gloomy, doubting acquiescence of Timothy, the impatient insistence of Meg, were all interrupted by the return of Dr. Curley carrying food ; and then Meg remembered how long it was since she had eaten, and gladly swallowed something of his poor provisions. When the old man began to take away plate and porringer, Andrew suddenly scrambled up and left the crypt with him, under pretence of helping him to carry his load.

Once in the high nave, pacing down to the twilight of evening, the soldier drew himself to his full height and breathed long and freely. "Look you, father," he said, with gruff suddenness, "my Lady Margaret will go her own way and please her sweet self. But I would fain know what has turned her sharp round and made her hate the man she loved so well. They may call my Lord Marlowe crazy, but 'tis a good man and a gentleman, who loves her with all his strength. Crazy now with grief at the loss of her he may be, if you will ; but an she hate him so cruelly, it were no kindness to break faith with her, and let him know where to find her."

"Nay, nay, do you not know ?" said the queer old priest, his face wreathed in pitiful smiles. "I knew it from Leonard, and guessed it partly from herself, poor lamb. She is jealous of the Queen. There you have the secret, Master Andrew, and 'twill be hard, I warn you, to change her mind now ; she is wounded and wrathful to the core. That explains all, hey ?"

"By the Saints, she knows him ill ! That a woman

can be so faithless ! ” Black Andrew muttered in his beard.

A few minutes found him back on his knees at his lady's feet, and now his rough visage had taken a gentler look, and there was the light of understanding in the eyes that met her friendly glances. Simon's plans were going apace ; the good wine and meat had warmed Meg's blood, and hope was springing through sadness. Life could never again be happy, she told herself, but it might and should be free. “ And you, Andrew, you will stay behind at Ruddiford,” she said, with a touch of wistful kindness. “ We shall want no warriors in our peaceful cavalcade.”

Andrew passed his broad hand over his mouth, looking at her keenly. “ Have I so far offended you, Mistress Margaret ? Nay, I think the good brothers can away with a stout serving-man. I'll take a cudgel, and crack a few heads on the road, if need be. You must go, if you will, to seek these foreign uncles, but you do not budge without Black Andrew,—no, by my holy patron's bones ! ”

Chapter XXVI

A FUNERAL PROCESSION

UP to a certain point, all was carried out as Simon Toste had planned it. He sent a letter in advance to London by a trusty man of his own, warning his cousin the merchant to expect the party. They started at dead of night from the priest's house at King's Hall, and by morning were many miles from Ruddiford on the south road.

The two worthy brothers, in black, with high hats, the picture of smug respectability, rode their stout nags beside the litter which carried Dame Kate and her supposed niece, wrapped up and disguised, so far as possible, as a young woman of the middle class. Black Andrew, in plain leather and steel, armed to the teeth, but without a sign of belonging to any great house, rode a few yards in advance. Behind came a pack-horse with the baggage, and two old servants of the Toste brothers, who, though discreet and silent men, were unaware who it was that the litter really contained. They knew that their masters and Black Andrew were going to town on business connected with Sir William's will ; that was enough for them.

It was not an uncommon thing to see such a quiet little travelling party on the high road. There was nothing about them, no valuable horse-flesh, gay dress, or rich convoy, to tempt an attack by vagabonds of high or low degree, who knew very well, also, that sturdy folks of this plain kind were often a harder nut to crack than those who made more show.

At the same time, marauding parties from the two

armies made the road more unsafe than usual, and by Black Andrew's advice,—given, it is true, with a certain twinkle in his dark eyes—the Masters Toste and their party kept as much as possible to lanes and byways, always bearing towards London, but travelling as the crow may be supposed to fly, rather than as the road led. Andrew's notion of a crow's flight was at times original. Timothy, anxious, cautious, but ignorant, was often seriously puzzled about his bearings. Simon showed a more cheerful confidence.

"Seemeth to me, friend Andrew," Timothy suggested, "that you bear too much to the south in this cross-country way of yours."

"Nothing of the sort, Master Timothy," Andrew growled; and any suspicion of being misled might have been on his side, so grimly did he squint upon Timothy from the corner of his eye. "Look you, there is the sun," he said, "and there is the moon. Our way lies south-east; you will not dispute it. If I lead you on a more easterly track, you will find yourselves presently on the shores of the North Sea. Trust me; I know the country well. Nay, if you doubt me, I'll back to Ruddiford, and leave you and Master Simon to cross this common and thread yonder woods without a guide."

"My good friend," said Timothy, "never threaten what you will never carry out." His severe mouth and hollow cheeks relaxed into a smile as he pointed at the litter, making its slow way along the edge of a wide common that broke gradually on the horizon into forest. Black Andrew also smiled. "The counsel is good," he said. As he turned and rode on in advance of the party, he was still smiling.

It was evening when they had passed through a corner of the forest and came out upon a place where a steep lane led down to the high road. They could see it winding along, muddy and yellow, through the valley. Half a mile farther on it crossed a long and narrow bridge over a stream that spread into green

marshes, so that the road for some distance on each side was boggy and deep. At the farther end of the bridge there was a little stone house where the collector of tolls lived. Had it not been for the Abbey whose servant he was, the bridge would long ago have fallen into ruin and the place become impassable ; but yet his calling in these days was a dangerous one.

The evening was mild, the sunset light soft and beautiful. All the woods were flushed with spring. Grey in the distance, a church tower stood against the clear eastern sky, and about it were clustered the red and thatched roofs of a village ; it was at a way-side inn beyond the village, rather than at the Abbey a mile away in the fields, hidden by a shoulder of purple ploughed hills, that the little party meant to rest a few hours that night.

Black Andrew advised Simon and Timothy to keep near the litter in the shadow of the wood, while he rode a few yards along the lane to inspect the bridge and the stretch of road. It was a place where outlaws were apt to take their stand, to ride suddenly down on any rich company, ill guarded, who might be approaching the bridge. Andrew wished to make sure that no such ill-doers would interfere with him and his charge on their way down to the high-road. His attention, however, was suddenly attracted from the immediate neighbourhood of ditch and clustered bushes, in which, to-day, no marauders seemed to be hiding, to certain sounds, measured, musical, and strange, coming from the north-west along the road up the valley. He dismounted quickly, and led his horse cautiously forward to a place where he had a longer view of the road.

A procession was advancing, black against the sunset, yet flashing with many points of light that flared in the evening air. There were a troop of horsemen riding at a foot's pace ; there were a number of men on foot, two and two, carrying a tall crucifix, censers and torches and candles, chanting and singing

as they came ; there was a great coach, drawn by six horses and hung with black and silver, with torch-bearers walking on each side of it, splashing through the miry way. Then came a gentleman riding alone, swaying wearily in the saddle, a black cloak and long black trappings covering horse and rider. Then more singing men with torches, then litters and pack-horses, with a second troop of armed horsemen bringing up the rear. And the *Miserere* rose and fell with solemn monotony, and all the valley seemed filled with hoarse music, barbaric, yet thrilling and stately, while the hills echoed back the waves of sound. The long scattered line travelled along securely, for there were few outlaws desperate enough to earn an eternal curse by attacking a funeral procession, richly formed as it might be.

"The devil, my masters ! we have come too quickly," Andrew muttered between his teeth, when he had for some minutes considered the slow-moving spectacle.

"Nay, good Andrew, too slowly," a clear voice said close to his ear.

He started round to see Mistress Meg standing behind him, with Dame Kate hobbling up behind, and the two brothers in the rear.

There was a strange brightness in Margaret's face, so thin and ethereal ; her eyes were full of light as they followed that weary figure riding alone behind the great coach. Of what was he thinking, Harry Marlowe, while with an almost unnatural loyalty he conveyed his father's dead wife home to his father's house ? The girl who had disappeared from his life—was there any room for her in those melancholy thoughts of his ? Or were they all filled with the pain of once more leaving that other Margaret, and returning south to bury his dead while she and the King and their little army pressed on northward ?

Mistress Meg's question was not so positively answered as it would have been a few days before. It had been impossible to silence the old nurse. Dame

Kate had talked and talked through the long hours of all that had happened since the siege of Ruddiford began. Meg now knew the true tale of the three straws, and much more beside. Lord Marlowe's reputation did not suffer in Dame Kate's hands. To her mind, at least, there was no doubt of his love for Meg, his passionate grief at losing her ; a touch of craziness, if you will ; but no disloyalty. To the Queen, he was a courtier who placed a faithful devotion to a losing cause before every other duty ; to Margaret, a lover whose passion so possessed him that he forced himself, according to his nature, to set his duty before his love ; to his own house and name, so loyal that even a wicked woman, a supposed murderess, who hated him and would have slain him if she could, claimed honour at his hands and must be followed by him to her burial.

Dame Kate's chatter, and her own calmer thoughts, had taught Meg to suspect that she had done Harry injustice. But not a word of this escaped her ; and any change of plan seemed an impossibility. She could not now return to Ruddiford ; she was too proud to change her mind again. Whatever the truth as to the Queen might be, she shrank from following her. In London, she had no friends with whom to remain. She must press on, must hide from the faithful men who guarded her any lingering love for old England, any tremors at the thought of a cold green sea and mountains of snow, flowing and swelling between her and Harry for all life to come. The Italian sky, the famous beauty and glory of her mother's city, had suddenly lost their attractive power. She remembered Antonio, and shuddered. Little as Simon knew it, every look of Meg's that fell on the grey English landscape as they travelled south had in it an agony of farewell. And now, to-night, it had needed no words to explain to her the meaning of that procession winding through the valley, or to point out to her keen young sight the tired horseman

stooping on his horse's neck, just as he had stooped on Christmas Eve, before her eyes kindled the light in his, making him at once free and a captive. Ah, this time he was too far off. Following sad and stern in Isabel Marlowe's funeral train, was he in thought mourning Meg Roden, lost and dead?

Black Andrew stared at her with wonder in his eyes. Dame Kate muttered under her breath, "Now, if my Lord only knew," but Simon nudged her to be still. The little group stood together at the edge of the high lane, and watched till the procession began to wind out of sight, till the long body of the great coach went swaying over the bridge, and the solitary horseman had followed it, and the voices of the singing men were muffled by the hill that began to rise between.

"Truly, Andrew," Simon said with irritation, "you have managed ill to bring us into such near contact. They will scarce travel through the night; we shall fall in with them in the village yonder; even if they abide at the Abbey, some of them will take the inn."

"Ay," grumbled Timothy, "and even if they should travel by night, we travel quicker and should fall in with them again. 'Tis an ill-managed business; as Mistress Meg says, we should have been before them."

Black Andrew took little notice of these remarks. He was watching his lady, and considering what her looks might mean. Perhaps some sudden fancy, for he had a lively brain, made him hope one knows not what. But soon he found that no such presumption was justified.

"You thought to pass the night in yonder village, Andrew?" she said, and the light had died in her eyes, and her voice was hollow and cold, like that of one alone in a desert world. "No; it is my will to pass on and travel through the night. Hurry! you will cross the bridge and be clear of the place before the procession has reached the Abbey and scattered itself. But hurry, I say! for there are many men

there who will know us, and I will not be stayed in my journey. On to London town with all the haste you may."

Andrew's dark bearded lips showed a gleam of white teeth, and his eyes were fixed on Meg, as she spoke, with a strange look not unlike fear. But he saluted, and turned to his horse. "As you will, mistress. The beasts are fresh enough, and I know a place where we can sup by the road-side, half-a-dozen miles farther on. Get you back to your litter, then, and say not that Andrew delays you."

And so they followed Lady Marlowe's funeral train across the bridge, and through the low straggling village where the people were standing at their doors, and past the paved road to the Abbey, which wound between high walls, and along which the solemn *Miserere* came echoing down, and the tramp of many feet was plainly to be heard.

Meg had drawn the curtains of the litter close, and as her little cavalcade, slipping past unobserved, paced on into the brown depths of evening, she lay with her face hidden in her hands. The chance of life had brought her very near her love once again, and by her own will she was passing him by. It seemed that those funeral chants were not alone for Isabel; it was the happiness of their two lives that Harry and Meg were burying. For that the mourners mourned, and for that the Abbey bells chimed out heavily.

Black Andrew's party were not long allowed by their guide to keep the high road. Again he led them apart through lanes and by-ways, avoiding towns, gradually working southward, persistently keeping a little more to the right than Timothy would have done. It is possible that he, though not pretending to be very familiar with the way to London, would have led them there by a more direct journey, even though making little use of the great roads. But Black Andrew appeared sure of himself. His route

took a long time, but seemed a secure one. It was impossible to hurry him ; when Mistress Roden sternly gave orders for a better speed, his horse fell mysteriously lame. Nor was that much wonder, for the lanes now began to be full of sharp flints, and to wind up and down difficult and slippery slopes. Great beech-woods, which had showered their masses of dead leaves in the autumn, covered all the face of the country ; the track that wound among them was soft with peat and wet chalk ; it was a matter of careful going, if one would not slip, among the undergrowth of yew and holly and box, down into some deep chalk dell with a bubbling spring at the bottom of it. Above the beech there were fir-woods, in which the March wind rushed and sang. All the country, when the sun shone, glowed with the coming spring ; there were primroses under sheltered banks, blue violets in the moss, about the roots of the beech trees.

"Where are we, Andrew ? " called the young, stern voice from the litter. "How far from London town ? "

"A matter of thirty mile, Mistress Meg," Andrew answered, and rode on whistling.

Chapter XXVII

THE THIRD STRAW

THE sun was shining low in the sky, but the wind was still, and the birds were singing, the rooks cawing in the tops of the ancient limes by the water-side, when after labouring through a hollow way in a wood the travellers came out on the hill-top and saw the beautiful valley below them.

A steep flinty lane seemed to lead down straight upon the long leaded roof and low tower of a church, above which a great flag hung motionless. The green churchyard, bordered with trees already old, chiefly elms and large yews, broke away into broad slopes of park and flushing woodland, the bare part of the hill studded over with thorn-trees. Below could be seen great gardens, with high hedges of box and yew and formal walks among which the river ran shining, playing and eddying round an island with ruins on it, alive with swans and water-fowl, and full of fish. The house itself, the centre of all, scarcely showed its chimneys and turrets above the surrounding trees and the curve of the beautiful hill. Beyond were lines of stately trees, carrying the eye far down the stream and the road through the valley, bounded by more woods on the other sides, and abrupt hills where the white chalk gleamed in the sunshine.

Margaret Roden saw all this, for Black Andrew stopped his company at the top of the hill and advised her to dismount from the litter. Her companions all exclaimed at the beauty and richness of the place. She alone said nothing, but frowned, with puzzled eyes, as if she had opened them waking and found

herself in the midst of some well-known but impossible dream.

She walked on slowly down the stony way, which was indeed like a path for penitent pilgrims, ending at the church-door. The others followed her at a little distance ; and she was not aware that Timothy Toste turned on Black Andrew with a sudden, fierce accusation, that Simon's face glowed like the setting sun between rage and unconquerable amusement, that Dame Kate chuckled with joy and held her sides as she came waddling down the hill. Andrew had edged south from the direct road for some purpose ; he had brought them to Swanlea.

"All very well, rascal, but you will repent," Timothy said furiously.

"Ay, I fear we shall all repent, for her mind is set firm," muttered Simon.

Andrew did not smile ; his face was full of a grim resolve. "If she is wroth with me, let her punish me," he said. "If I have done wrong, I'm ready to pay for it,—with my life, if need be."

Simon wagged his head anxiously. "She may kill you, Andrew. It may be a word and a blow. How dared you do it, man ?"

Andrew did not care to justify himself. He left that work to Lord Marlowe and the future.

"On my life, Andrew, thou hast done a fine and bold thing," said Dame Kate. "And if I were young I'd marry thee for it."

Mistress Meg walked down the steep and flinty way. A sharp turn, when she was very near the church, brought her into sight of its wide sheltering porch and the low wicket gate that closed it from the road. There, where the full evening light from the south-west fell upon them, a group of three persons were standing ; two men and a woman, in deep mourning all. They had the air of waiting and watching, their faces turned to the hill, down which Meg was coming.

She came, as if indeed she was walking in some

familiar dream. The awkward garments in which they had wrapped her for the journey did not hide the grace and majesty of the young figure and its movements. Her eyes returned from wandering over the lovely, home-like landscape to rest upon the church with its grey flint-built walls, and then, with a frown of utter bewilderment, on the three who were waiting there,—waiting for her, it seemed, yet how could it be? She asked herself if she had ever known that Swanlea was on the road to London, for she was not quick to suspect Andrew's good faith, as her companions had been. Then she forgot to wonder at all, for the woman, fair and pretty, smiling too, in spite of her heavy black robes and eyes wet with tears, ran suddenly up the hill with eager arms open to receive the traveller.

"Meg, dear Meg! Safe with us, my sister, my friend! Nay, you have not forgotten Alice! Art dreaming, child? Dick, see, she has forgotten me. No wonder, after all the horror,—but Meg, dearest——"

"And me, too, I wager, sweet!"

The Popinjay merited his name no longer. He was pale, he had clipped his yellow locks; the mourning for his mother suited him ill, body and mind; Dick Marlowe was made for the sunshine of life. Yet as he came up to Meg, dropped on his knee and kissed her hand, there was something in his young face, a manliness mixed with kindness, which she had never seen there before. Alice Tilney had made a man of him.

Meg gave him her hand, leaned her cheek to Alice's embrace, but yet gazed, gazed, with eyes full of a vague wonder that was almost terror, at the third figure now following the others up the hill. If he came slowly, she knew it was that he could not, like herself, believe in the divine happiness of that moment. He was coming back to her from a world of blood and fire, where many lives younger and stronger than his had been laid down. He bore the marks of it all; his hair was grey and his face lined; there was a measureless sadness in his eyes, waiting to be com-

forted. He bore too, but that she did not know, the sorrow of her doubting him; to have that burden lifted off for ever, he had waited till his last duty to Isabel Marlowe was paid, and till at his own Swanlea he could claim Meg in spite of herself. Black Andrew, in his confidence, had served him well.

He came too slowly, doubting a little of himself, hardly knowing her mind towards him. Suddenly with each hand she pushed Alice and Dick away, and went to Harry Marlowe with light steps, almost running, her eyes on his, till she was held safe in his arms.

"Andrew, lucky dog, she will not punish thee," little Simon murmured, coming to the turn in the lane. "Nay, if she rewarded thee, I should not marvel."

* * * *

And so Simon Toste remained for ever a stranger to the art and the science of Italy. He and Timothy, after a short sojourn at Swanlea, returned to Ruddiford in the company of Lord and Lady Marlowe. These two married lovers lingered there long enough to carry out Sir William Roden's will, and to bury the old hero of Agincourt, with all fitting ceremony, in the chapel where his wife and sons lay; and then, leaving their interests in the hands of Richard and his wife, they rode off together to the north, before their troubles came, to join and follow the Queen.

Long years passed before Swanlea and Ruddiford saw their rightful masters again, for these, with many another Lancastrian lord and lady, crossed the sea to France, and did not return till Henry the Seventh was on the throne, and the Red and White Roses divided English faith no longer.

There is a picture, supposed to be by Mabuse, of a stately gentleman of seventy-five or more, with white hair and beard, and a lady, perhaps a score of years younger, most majestic and beautiful, with a wonderful string of pearls about her neck. These sit

on chairs, hand in hand ; and grouped behind and about them are their sons and daughters, seven in number, worthy of them in looks and bearing. It is a noble family group, such as some old painters loved ; and it belonged to a family, soldiers all from Agincourt downwards, which became extinct at Waterloo. The gallant Colonel Harry Marlowe, who fell in leading one of the boldest charges on that day, was the only remaining descendant of Henry Lord Marlowe,—known as Mad Marlowe and the Queen's Man—and of the lovely Margaret Roden of Ruddiford.

THE END





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